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CAN SOMEONE PLEASE EXPLAIN WHAT'S GOING ON?!

~The Contract Couple's
Happily Ever After~



Author: *Tsurezurebana*
Illustrator: *Rin Hagiwara*



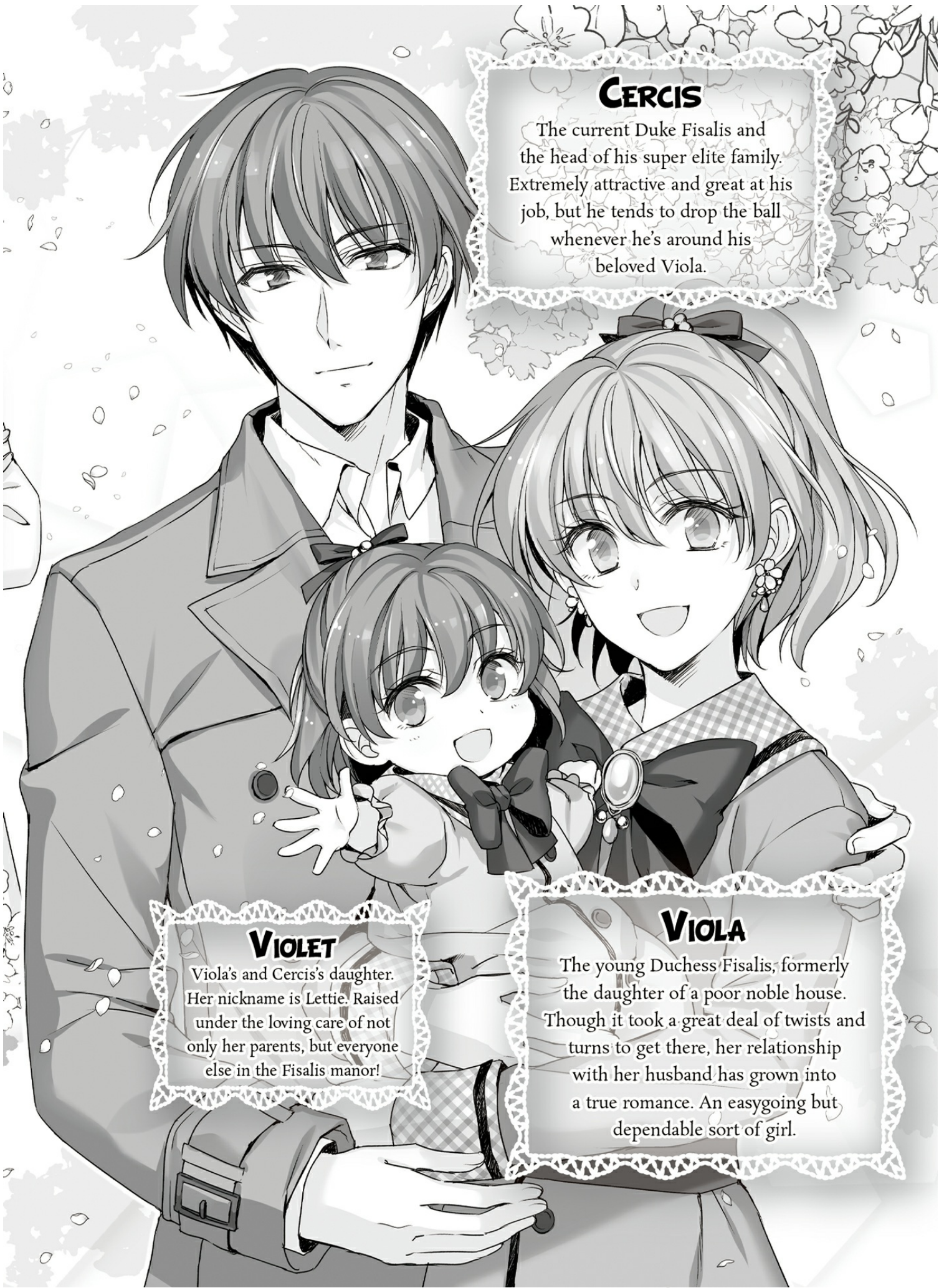
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CERCIS

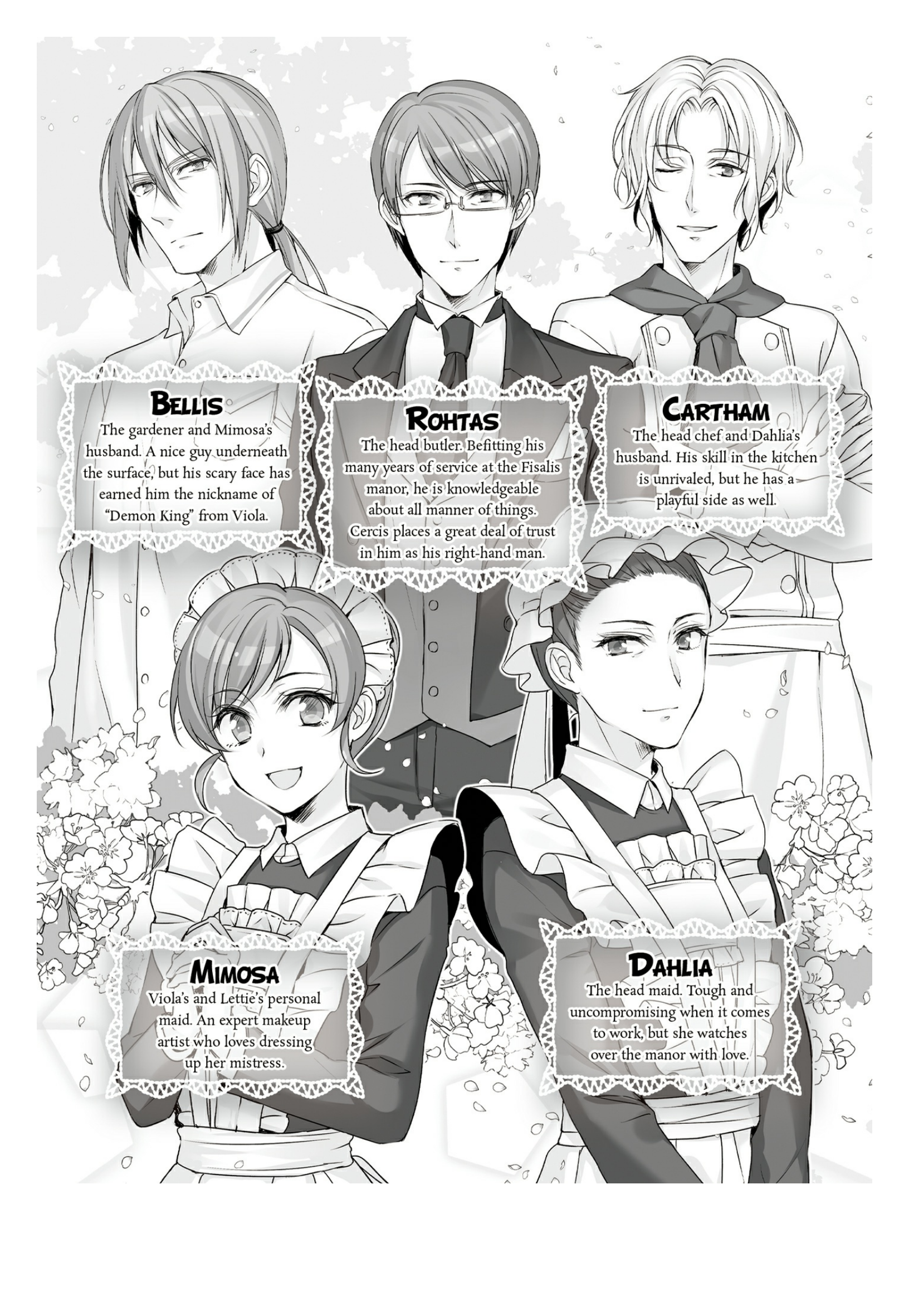
The current Duke Fisalis and the head of his super elite family. Extremely attractive and great at his job, but he tends to drop the ball whenever he's around his beloved Viola.

VIOLET

Viola's and Cercis's daughter. Her nickname is Lettie. Raised under the loving care of not only her parents, but everyone else in the Fisalis manor!

VIOLA

The young Duchess Fisalis, formerly the daughter of a poor noble house. Though it took a great deal of twists and turns to get there, her relationship with her husband has grown into a true romance. An easygoing but dependable sort of girl.



BELLIS

The gardener and Mimosa's husband. A nice guy underneath the surface, but his scary face has earned him the nickname of "Demon King" from Viola.

ROHTAS

The head butler. Befitting his many years of service at the Fialis manor, he is knowledgeable about all manner of things. Cercis places a great deal of trust in him as his right-hand man.

CARTHAM

The head chef and Dahlia's husband. His skill in the kitchen is unrivaled, but he has a playful side as well.

MIMOSA

Viola's and Lettie's personal maid. An expert makeup artist who loves dressing up her mistress.

DAHLIA

The head maid. Tough and uncompromising when it comes to work, but she watches over the manor with love.

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Prologue

It had been several years since I, Viola Mangelica Fisalis (née Euphorbia), had married into the Fisalis family. Our union had started out as one of convenience—or more accurately, as part of a contract—but the two of us went through a lot together. Before we knew it, we’d reached our fairytale ending as a loving husband and wife.

And as it happens, we’d even been blessed with a darling daughter! Just how good does it get?!

We didn’t get the news just going about our lives like normal either. There was no casual reveal of “Hey, we’re having a baby!” and “Hooray!”—we found out I was pregnant right after we’d had one of my most precious necklaces stolen!

Everyone had been overjoyed to hear our announcement.

*

“Mommy! Daddy! So what happened when I was bown?” asked our darling daughter (or “angel,” as Mr. Fisalis loved to call her), Violet, turning those innocent, sparkling eyes of hers up towards me.

Whoops, looks like she still hasn’t forgotten about that.

While the three of us had been kicking back as a family the other day, Violet had asked us to tell her the story of how she was born, totally out of the blue.

There was a lot about the “romance” between me and Mr. Fisalis that wasn’t fit for a child’s ears. (That’s *one* way of putting it.) What were we supposed to do, tell her the full story? Yeah, no—*that* wasn’t going to happen.

Fortunately, we had managed to worm our way out of that dilemma by glossing over certain bits of the tale. Thinking ahead, Mr. Fisalis and I were going to need to work together to invent—*ahem*, nail down the details of our love story. It was a matter of the utmost urgency.

Yet here was Violet, back to asking questions already. Now that she mentioned it, though, we *had* only covered up to the part where Mr. Fisalis and his knights won back my stolen necklace in a breathtaking display of skill, only for me to find out I was expecting shortly afterwards.

It had been a few days since we'd told her part one of the story. Now that we were in a similar situation—the three of us enjoying our tea together in the parlor—it must have reminded Violet of that earlier conversation.

Mr. Fisalis gave her a blank stare, but it didn't take long for the question to ring a bell. "Want to hear the rest of the story?"

"Yeah!"

Violet was beaming with joy from her daddy's lap.

Now, where to begin...?

1. After Much Ado

“Cercis! *Cercis!* Wake up! You’re going to be late for work!”

For once in his life, Mr. Fisalis had overslept.

He’d spent the previous night drinking with his knights at some work party he’d gotten dragged into, which had kept him out until the wee hours of the morning. Even then, he was generally the sort to wake up totally refreshed the next day. Was this a sign of how stressed out he’d been lately?

The day before he’d even told me, “I have a meeting tomorrow morning, so I have to head out early.” So much for that.

Just look at me—I’m all dressed and ready to head into action! Not that I have plans to go anywhere.

“Mm...mn...”

“C’mon, Cercis, didn’t you say that you had an important meeting today?”

Another rough shake got him to turn over in his sleep, but his eyelids remained firmly shut.

“You’re gonna be late!”

Coochy-coochy-coo! If shaking him wasn’t doing the trick, it was time to resort to tickling! Unfortunately, that didn’t seem to work much better.

“Jeez. He’s a tough nut to crack this morning,” I groused, growing frustrated with how stubbornly he was clinging to sleep.

Both Rohtas and Stellaria gave a dry little laugh from behind me.

“And to think Master Fisalis is usually such an early bird.”

“This is a rare occurrence indeed. Would you like me to take over from here, Madam?” the butler offered, but I was determined to stick it out a little bit longer.

“Nah. I’m not done yet.”

For my next move... I know, I'll pinch that pretty little nose of his! Hee hee... If he can't breathe, he'll have no choice but to wake up!

And yet, wouldn't you know it—his mouth fell open instead. Another failed attempt.

That's it! Desperate times call for desperate measures! Say goodbye to that cozy blanket of yours!

"Take that!"

"...Brrr!"

The moment I tore the covers away from him, his eyes snapped open. *Oh, is he finally awake?*

"Come on! It's time for breakfast!"

"Vi..."

Dang, is it just me or does the dazed, fresh-out-of-bed look give him an extra boost in the sex appeal department? I thought to myself—only to be pulled into his embrace not a second later.

"Eek! Knock it off, Cercis!"

"Mm..."

After taking advantage of my moment of panic to steal back the blankets, he cocooned himself in the sheets and was immediately out like a light.

Seriously?! You're going back to sleep after that?!

"I give up! This is impossible!" I relented, heaving a sigh as I peered into my husband's doggedly slumbering face.

"Go ahead and get started on breakfast," said Rohtas, who had been watching the scene play out from behind me. "You can leave Master Fisalis to me."

"I don't mind having a late breakfast—I'm not in any rush. I'm more worried that Mr. Fisalis will be late to work if he doesn't wake up soon."

"Believe me, you have nothing to worry about. Go wait for him in the dining room."

Here I was freaking out like I was the one who had overslept, but Rohtas only smiled and ushered me out of the room. In a flawless show of teamwork, Stellaria stepped up to open the door and waited for me on the other side.

The implication of “get out” wasn’t exactly subtle.

“Fine, fine. I’ll wait for you guys there.”

I left the task of waking my husband to Rohtas and went ahead to the dining room.

For your sake, Mr. Fisalis, I sure hope it’s a gentle awakening!

*

“I’m not sure what to do now. I’ll feel bad if I start eating without him.”

“No need to worry, Madam,” said Dahlia, who had been waiting for me in the dining room. “I’m sure he’ll be up in no time.”

“You think so? Okay—can I ask you to start bringing out the food, then?”

“Of course.”

Just as I was about to start in on breakfast at my maid’s suggestion, there came the thud of someone bolting down the corridor.

“Oh, who could that be?”

“It’s dangerous to run in the halls. I’ll have to scold—”

No sooner had Dahlia stopped what she was doing with a frown than the door to the dining room flung open.

“Sorry I’m late!”

In came Mr. Fisalis, his shoulders heaving as he wheezed. Though he had of course taken the time to change out of his pajamas, he was looking a little disheveled, the shirt of his uniform left untucked.

Leave it to a hunk like him to make even that look good... No—focus, Viola, focus!

“It was Mr. Fisalis, I see.”

“That it was.”

My maid and I couldn't help sharing a sardonic smile.



Mr. Fisalis cleared his throat. "Ahem. Morning, Vi. Shall we get started on breakfast?" he proposed, flashing me a smile and taking his seat as though nothing had happened. Rohtas entered the room not long after him.

"Don't you 'morning' me! I thought you might never wake up!"

"My bad."

"I'm just glad you got up in time. Trust Rohtas to get the job done."

"...Yeah."

Mr. Fisalis's expression took a turn for the disgruntled as he cast a glance over at Rohtas, who was hanging back with his usual poker face on.

Huh? He did get a gentle awakening, right?

"Cercis?"

"Come now, time is getting away from us! We'd better get to eating. Ha ha ha!"

Jeez, could that smile be any more forced?

It was right at that moment that our meal was carried out to the table, however, so we proceeded to eat our breakfast together, after which I saw my husband off with a smile like always.

*

"Cercis sure had a hard time getting up this morning."

"It was nothing more than a case of burnout, I'm sure," Rohtas assured me. "Staying up all night drinking certainly doesn't help, however."

"Wow, you aren't pulling your punches today!"

The butler only flashed me a grin. He wasn't even bothering to deny it.

Since my morning had been a tad more frenzied than usual thanks to Mr. Fisalis, our butler was making me a new cup of tea in the parlor.

"Still, I really have to hand it to you for getting him out of bed, Rohtas. I saw how dead to the world he was! How did you manage it?"

"Oh, it wasn't anything special."

Here I was hoping Rohtas would bequeath the skill unto me for future reference, but the man in question only looked down at me with his trademark unruffled smile.

“Yeah, right! I mean, c’mon—he was out like a light!”

“True. All the same, he could still hear your voice.”

“Wait, really?”

“Indeed.”

If he could hear me, then why didn’t he bother to get up?

“When I reminded him about the morning meeting, he muttered, ‘Viola already told me that.’”

“I *did* mention that to him, yeah.”

But he didn’t show the slightest sign of stirring when I said it.

“I assume he was still half-asleep at the time.”

“Probably.”

“It took him a little while longer to come to his senses, but a few simple words got him right out of bed and rushing to the dining room.”

Now *that* piqued my interest. What, had our straight-faced butler told a joke or something?

“What did you say?”

“Oh, nothing too interesting. All I did was tell him, ‘If you don’t get changed soon, you’ll miss your chance to eat breakfast with the madam.’”

“That’s all?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Yeah, I could definitely imagine Mr. Fisalis’s reaction to hearing that.

“That *is* the most effective threat to use against Master Fisalis,” remarked Stellaria, giggling as she pictured the scene for herself.

“Your tongue might be the sharpest weapon I’ve ever seen, Rohtas. You sure know how to hit someone where it hurts.”

“You flatter me.”

“Why don’t *you* try using that threat against him next time, Madam?” Stellaria proposed with a titter, but that was a no thank you from me! I didn’t have a teasing bone in my body.

“Who, me? Not happening! And I won’t need to as long as Cercis gets up when he’s supposed to. I’ll just make sure he goes to bed on time from now on.”

“That might be a tall order, I’m afraid.”

“Then I’m putting you in charge of waking him up in the mornings, Rohtas!”

“Oh, he’s not going to like that one bit.”

“You’ve got that right!” the rest of the room chimed in, roaring with laughter.

2. An Anti-Climax?

Though I'd been hit with a succession crisis just as soon as I'd gotten into the swing of my laid-back pregnant lifestyle, my parents-in-law had swooped in from their far-off home of Le Pied to throw me a lifeline. Their encouraging advice of "It doesn't matter if you have a boy or a girl so long as you and the baby make it through all right" had pulled me out of my funk, and it was without further issue or internal dilemma that I reached the final stages of my pregnancy.

My baby bump had grown awfully large by now, but spending my days lazing about the manor would "be bad for me *and* the child I was carrying." (—Dahlia) Thus, I frittered most afternoons away going for leisurely strolls around the garden.

For someone who worked(?) as hard as I usually did, it felt a little too laid back to count as real exercise. That said, the gardens of the Fisalis manor were *huge*.

Though I generally only went as far as the greenhouse near the mansion or my own personal garden behind the cottage, I'd determined this was the perfect opportunity to scour the grounds from top to bottom, and I was in the midst of an invigorating walk with my escort, Stellaria. Pay no attention to the knight-guards bringing up our rear!

"Man, the trees around the mansion get as dense as forest. In fact, we pretty much *are* in the middle of the woods, aren't we?"

"That's right. The estate was designed to be hidden from outsiders."

The mansion itself was encircled by towering walls to stave off any unwanted guests. Within those walls, a myriad of tall trees had been planted around the grounds to give it the look of a forest—which also served to keep out prying eyes. A trail ran between the walls and the trees, which the manor's knight-guards diligently patrolled to keep our home safe.

Not too long ago, a band of thieves had broken into our mansion under the cover of a storm, but we'd tightened our security even further since the incident. Following that little disturbance, we'd had iron grates installed over the windows (retractable, plus sophisticated enough to keep the place from feeling like a jail when they were down!) to make our manor an even more impregnable fortress than before, but we hadn't stopped there; Rohtas told me he'd drafted a new security protocol too thorough to fail come rain or shine.

But I think that's enough explanation of the gardens for now.

"I can't believe how big the place is. You could take a carriage around the grounds and no one would bat an eye."

"True. Makes it perfect for a walk, wouldn't you say?"

"You said it! C'mon, let's do this thing!"

And so it was that I made a daily routine of strolling around the premises.

*

"Isn't it about time for Master Fisalis to be getting home?"

We'd gone for a walk after lunch that day, and by the time we made it back to my private garden, it was well into the evening. Just as Stellaria said, Mr. Fisalis could be home any minute now.

"We'd better start heading back to the mansion, then...or so I was *about* to say."

"Hm?"

Just as we turned to walk back to the manor, I spotted a weed near my feet. Stellaria followed my gaze and likewise her eyes landed upon the offending growth.

"A weed?"

"It sure is. And I'm afraid I'm not the type to let one go once I've set my sights on it."

"Yes, I'm well aware."

A pretty wildflower would have been one thing, but this particular weed stuck

out like a sore thumb. I wasn't about to just leave it there.

"I'll head back once I've pulled this out."

"All right."

The moment I crouched down to uproot the weed, I saw Rohtas and Bellis heading our way from the direction of the manor.

"Wow, now here's a rare sight. Looks like someone's come to pick us up."

"So it would seem."

Whenever Rohtas came by to inform us of the time, he usually came alone. Did Bellis have some business out in the garden? Not that it made a difference either way—the pair didn't appear to be in any rush, so whatever they were up to clearly wasn't time-sensitive.

"All right—time to yank this thing out!"

I grabbed the weed with both hands.

I'd been so sure I could pull it out of the ground in two seconds flat. Unfortunately for me, it turned out to be unexpectedly tenacious, and a light tug proved insufficient to free it.

"Oh, drat! It won't budge!"

"The roots of that particular species of weed run deeper than you'd think," explained Bellis as he came over, glancing down at my hands.

"What, really? Hrm..."

"Don't push yourself too hard, or else—"

Though I cast Stellaria a sidelong glance as she implored me not to put too much strain on my stomach, I ignored her advice and tugged on the weed with all my might.

"Don't worry! It's almost free! Heave...whoa!"

"Madam!" everyone cried out in alarm.

When I'd felt the weed starting to give, I'd given it as hard a yank as I could.

And it *did* come free.

The issue was that all my leftover momentum had sent me hurtling backwards.

Oh, crud, this is the part where I land flat on my back. I'd love to be optimistic here, but there's no way my belly's not going to feel the impact!

Just as I was starting to panic, Rohtas swiftly slid in from behind to catch me, ensuring that I never hit the ground.

"Thanks, Rohtas!"

"Oh, for heaven's sake... I'm just glad you're all right, Madam."

"I'm sorry about that!"

Now, while it was all well and good that Rohtas had gotten *me* out of that pickle unscathed...

"Bellis?!"

"I was distracted."

"Oh... Uh, my bad."

There stood Bellis, covered in the dirt I'd flung his way.

The flow of events went as follows: soil flew everywhere when I pulled the weed up by the roots → Bellis panicked when he thought I was going to tumble over and moved in to help me → but Rohtas was one step ahead of him, so he stopped where he was → a shower of soil rained down upon the spot where he was standing → as a result, he ended up covered in dirt.

And that should bring us up to speed.

"All that matters is that you're okay, Madam."

"But *you're* not okay!"

"A little dirt isn't going to kill me. This sort of thing happens to me all the time," Bellis responded, taking a handkerchief out of his pocket to wipe away the soil. The look on his face was as surly and unperturbed as ever, but combined with the pile of dirt sitting on his head...uh-oh. This was hilarious.

"Pfft..."

“Madam Fisalis?”

“I’m really sorry! It’s just, you look so funny like that...!”

Jeez, I can’t contain it any longer. Once I’d come out and said it, there was no stopping the laughter bubbling out of me.

“Sorry, Bellis! I know you’re used to working in the dirt, but when it’s sitting on your head like a hat? Aha ha ha ha!”

“See if I help you next time,” he groused. His trademark frosty aura was starting to coalesce around him, but it didn’t pack the same sort of punch when he was covered in soil.

“You’re not much of a Demon King today, Bellis.”

“Who do you think you’re calling a Demon King?”

“You. Tee hee.”

“Hmph. The next time something happens, you’re on your own.”



“Aww, c’mon! I said I was... Hm?”

While I was laughing and bantering with Bellis, I felt a pang in my stomach all of a sudden.

A cramp? Is that what you’d call this?

I frowned at the unpleasant sensation.

“What’s the matter?” asked Stellaria, peering into my face with concern when she noticed I had abruptly stopped laughing.

“Uh, I don’t know... My stomach feels weird?”

“What?!” came the surprised cry of everyone present.

“I’m not sure if ‘weird’ is the right word for it, or...huh? *Now it’s starting to hurt.*”

As I was assailed by a squeezing pain, my face twisted into a grimace.

“I remember the same thing happening to Mimosa,” said Bellis. From the sound of it, this wasn’t too different from how things had gone before his wife had her baby.

Rohtas sobered up instantly. “I see. Then she might be ready to give birth.”

“You’ll be all right, Madam! Just stay calm,” Stellaria assured me.

“I’ll leave the madam to you, Stellaria,” said Rohtas. “I’m going to go call for a doctor.”

“I’ll go get Dahlia and Mimosa,” Bellis offered.

“Owww... Thanks, guys!”

Once the trio had figured out the situation, it didn’t take long for them to regain their usual composure. Each one of the three jumped right into their respective duties. A capable servant knew how to keep their cool even at the eleventh hour, and the smoothness of their reaction managed to keep *me* from panicking too. *I appreciate it, guys!*

“Hold on, Madam. Dahlia and Mimosa should be here soon.”

“Yeah, I know. Owww...”

As I remained rooted to the spot, doing my best to ride out the wave of pain, the first person to arrive on the scene was *not* who I was expecting: it was none other than Mr. Fisalis himself.

“Vi! I heard you’re having stomach pains! Are you okay?”

“Oh, you’re home, Cercis!”

“I was surprised to find no one around to greet me when I got back only for Rohtas to come in from the garden and tell me that a stomach cramp had you incapacitated out in the garden. I rushed here as fast as I could.”

“Sorry...”

“Rohtas is calling for a doctor as we speak, so hang in there just a little bit longer.”

“Okay.”

Mr. Fisalis gently lifted me up in his arms and carried me off to the manor.

*

The pain continued to surge and ebb for a good long while after I was taken to my bedroom.

“You must be going into labor,” said Dahlia as she massaged my hips. “You’re far enough into your pregnancy that the timing seems right.”

“Really?”

“I can’t say for sure until the doctor confirms it, but that’s my best guess.”

Wow... So it won’t be long now before I finally meet my little one.

I was simultaneously filled with joy and the suspense of not knowing what lay in store for me, and the agony that assailed me was so overwhelming that I hardly had the time to sort out my own conflicted emotions. Talk about having my hands full!

Still, I somehow managed to keep myself calm until the doctor arrived.

Now that it’s come to this, all I can do is buckle down and prepare for the worst. I’m as ready as I’ll ever be—you can come on out whenever you want, kiddo! I thought, psyching myself back up again.

The doctor explained that soon, the intervals between my on-and-off bouts of pain—which would come and go almost like the tide—were going to start getting shorter and shorter.

I see. I'd better start counting the time between them, then. The last wave of pain just went away, so I wonder how long it'll be before the next one comes?

I waited.

And waited.

Huh? It's not coming.

Had having everyone's eyes on me made me so nervous that I stopped feeling the pain?

"Huh...?"

"What's wrong?" the doctor asked as she checked my pulse.

"The pain just stopped all of a sudden. What does that mean?"

"Oh, dearie me."

As happy as I was that the pain had subsided and I was feeling good as new...I couldn't help thinking this was a bit anticlimactic.

While I sat there stunned by this turn of events, the doctor eventually declared, "I believe this is what we call false labor." She then asked me, "Do you have any recent memory of exerting yourself physically, or perhaps having a particularly hearty laugh?"

Exerting myself physically? A hearty laugh? Yep, that rings a bell. I'm probably in for a lecture if I tell her about the part where I tipped over, so I'll keep that my little secret.

"Yeah. It was earlier this evening, out in the garden. I strained myself pretty hard trying to pull out a weed. And then I cracked up laughing when I saw Bellis covered in dirt."

"Well, that would do it. The overexertion and the fit of laughter must have put an undue amount of stress on your stomach."

"Whoopsie..."

From the sound of it, those hadn't been full-fledged labor pains, but false contractions caused by those hysterics of mine...among other things.

"What's the word?" Mr. Fisalis later asked Dahlia. "Is the baby on the way?"

"Not yet. It seems they weren't actual contractions."

"Damn..."

He seemed awfully disappointed to hear that it was a false alarm and our baby wasn't ready to be born just yet. *Sorry to get your hopes up!*

Be sure to save the real deal for another day Daddy is around, okay, Bitsy (name TBD)?

3. Dodging Events Feels a Little Lonely?

Those would-be contractions of mine had turned out to be something called “false labor.” I took it easy the following day just to be safe, but nothing ended up happening.

“I doubt the baby will be coming for a little while yet. Feel free to go about your life as you normally would,” advised the doctor.

Since pregnancy was the name of the game, it wasn’t the usual older male doctor checking up on me, but his wife. She was the same midwife who had helped Mimosa give birth to Daisy.

Not only did she specialize in delivering babies, but she was a veteran among veterans who had given birth to four children of her own, which afforded her sound judgment when it came to addressing my concerns or any changes in my physical condition.

If an expert like her thought it would be a little while yet, no doubt my meeting with Bitsy was still quite a ways down the road.

*

The weather grew warmer with the change of seasons, and Flür National Day drew ever closer. As if the end of the year wasn’t a busy enough time already between our annual cleaning blitz, decorating for New Year’s, and the preparations for the big feast ahead, all the fuss over those false contractions of mine had put us a tad behind schedule.

“The doctor told me to go about my life as usual, so I’m good to lend a helping hand.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Rohtas rejected my proposition outright.

“I can’t just put my feet up while everyone else is working so hard!”

“I don’t see why not.”

“Because I’ll lose my mind!”

“Well... I suppose you never *have* been the type to sit still.”

“See?”

“Fine. You can help out where you’re able. But don’t even think about pulling another stunt like you did the other day. You’ll put the rest of us in an early grave.”

“When I flipped backwards, you mean?”

“Precisely.”

“I have nothing to say for myself on that one.”

It was a fair criticism. I’d given *myself* quite the scare with that, and it must have been even more harrowing for the servants. I wasn’t about to put them through that a second time.

“How about I polish the silverware, then?”

“That would be wonderful.”

“Okie-dokie! I’ll make them shine like new!”

I could wipe windows and mop the floor all I wanted *after* I’d had my baby. Oh, and let’s not forget about fluffing the sheets! But for now, I had to be a good girl.

Not far from where we were polishing the silverware in the servants’ dining room, Cartham was planning out the menu for the remainder of the year into the new one. Mother and Father Fisalis would be visiting Rohze around that time, so he was putting even more effort into it than usual.

“Any requests, *Madame*?”

“I mean, there’s nothing *you* can’t make delicious! In theory I’d say whatever’s good, but I think I’d rather avoid anything too rich.”

“Noted! What about dessert?”

“Anything goes!”

“Ha ha ha! Got it.”

Cartham shot me a charming wink. No doubt he would devise a menu that

was the perfect balance of simple, tasty, *and* healthy.

*

Once I was done helping with the silverware, I decided it was time to go for my daily walk.

Among the servants bustling about with cleaning supplies in hand, I spotted a few carrying boughs of mistletoe.

“Oh, are we ready to start decorating?” I wondered aloud.

“It looks that way. We’ve finished cleaning all the major rooms.”

Just as Stellaria had said, the entrance hall, parlor, and dining room had all been cleaned to a shine, with not a speck of dust to be found. The proper order of things was to clean the public areas first before moving on to the guest rooms and other private spaces, so the cleaning crew had likely gone to work on the cottage and bedrooms by now.

With an eye for perfection, the servants went about hanging up the mistletoe.

“I wonder if the baby will be here in time for the new year. How perfect would it be if I could give my newborn a kiss under the mistletoe?”

“That’s a nice thought indeed, Madam.”

“That reminds me—His Majesty’s birthday falls on New Year’s, right? I’ll bet you anything he got tons of kisses. Oh, I’m almost jealous!”

“Well, who could say?”

Superstition had it that a kiss under the mistletoe on New Year’s brought good fortune. To receive that blessing so soon after coming into the world was sure to grant a lifetime’s worth of happiness.

*

The end of the year rolled around amid all the hustle and bustle, and my parents-in-law made it to Rohze.

“Fennel urged us not to make too much of a fuss, so we tried to be discreet about our arrival.”

“Would you believe it? Why, he even scolded me not to act like a child in a

candy store!”

It had been a while since I’d last heard news of Fennel, the old butler who worked in the villa. I was glad to hear he was doing well...but man, he sure could read his masters like a book, huh? It just went to show how long he’d been working for them.

“Anyway, how are you feeling lately? Is there any chance the baby might come during our visit?”

“Err, well... I’m not sure. I had some false contractions a few days ago, but nothing of note has happened since. I’ve been praying the baby will make it in time for the new year, personally.”

“That’s the dream, isn’t it?”

I gave my in-laws a brief recap of all the fuss over my false alarm.

“We don’t have any control over when it happens, so all we can do is wait and hope.”

“You’re right.”

Good things come to those who wait!

*

At long last, New Year’s Day—which also happened to be Flür National Day—had arrived. Men and women of all ages and status had to gather at the royal palace to attend the “Rite of Audience,” where they would listen to the king give his New Year’s address, a few words in honor of our National Foundation Day, and various other celebratory speeches.

Though I had mastered the skill of sleeping with my eyes open, I still wasn’t the biggest fan of these kinds of events. To make matters worse, the ultra-prestigious Fisalis family had been assigned to sit directly beside the royal family—one of the most prominent seats in the house, from which we had no choice but to look out over the masses. Even sleeping with my eyes open...I mean, uh, *spacing out* was simply not an option there, and the nerve-wracking seating arrangement only drove me deeper into the throes of melancholy. Back when I’d lived with my family, our seats had been so far away that I was free to doze

to my heart's content; but alas, those days were no more. Part of me was beginning to wonder if I could get away with popping back home just for the one day.

What's more, just the thought of having to attend with *this* baby bump was enough to make my stomach feel that much heavier.

It was just as I had started to worry about how I had nothing to wear but my casual dresses that Mr. Fisalis spoke up. "The baby could be born any moment now, so we're better off leaving Viola at home," he said—and lo, I had scored(?) myself permission to play hooky.

"Huh? I really don't have to go?"

"No. As much as I wish I could bring you along, I'd be beside myself with worry if I did."

"But if you still have to attend, what are we going to do if I go into labor partway through the ceremony?"

"I'll ditch the rite and run straight home!"

"Saw that one coming!"

I laughed at his predictable response only for my in-laws to raise their hands without missing a beat.

"I'd leave too."

"That makes three of us!"

Wait, really...? Leaving three of the most prominent seats empty sure sounds like a faux pas to me.

Now that we'd settled on leaving me out of the event, I saw the Fisalis trio off at the door.

"Weird... This doesn't sit well with me, somehow."

"What doesn't, Madam?" Rohtas asked me.

"The fact that I'm hanging around at home while Cercis is off at an official function."

"My, now that's the last thing I expected to hear from you. You and the

master are always whining about how you don't want to go to anything, right up until the very moment you leave."

Everyone else laughed at that remark of his, and it was too much of a bull's-eye for me to even bother denying it.

"D-Don't get me wrong! I'm not saying I *want* to attend. It's just, y'know, functions at the royal palace are always mandatory, so it feels wrong that I'm not going with him!"

"Is that so?"

Behind the grinning butler, I could see the maids looking at me with knowing smiles. *Hey, guys, could you knock it off?*

In fairness to them, I never *had* cared when Mr. Fisalis went out on his own (or with his girlfriend) toward the start of our marriage. Yet before I knew it, the two of us going out together had become the new normal for me. I'd never imagined that I'd be hit by a realization like *that* at a time like this.

*

Flür National Day passed without the mid-ceremony delivery we'd been so worried about. The New Year's festivities went off without a hitch, and life at the manor slowly but surely returned to normal. The servants began to take down the boughs of mistletoe, which were then recycled as kindling for the hearth.

"Our baby didn't make it in time for a mistletoe blessing. Too bad."

"Hm?"

"I was hoping to give our little one a kiss under the mistletoe if they were born before the end of the year. A New Year's birthday *and* a blessing of good fortune? That's a happy life guaranteed right there!"

"Oh, I see."

While I was chatting with Mr. Fisalis and watching the mistletoe come down from the walls with a tinge of disappointment, my parents-in-law came over from the cottage.

"By the way, how long are you two planning to stay?" my husband asked his

parents.

“Hm? Until the baby is born, of course.”

“What?”

“All our work back in the territory has been put on hold for the New Year holidays, so it’s not like we have anything better to be doing.”

“Sorry?” Mr. Fisalis and I unwittingly sounded off in unison.

As a general rule, my parents-in-law wouldn’t stick around Rohze too long after the event they’d traveled here for, so I *had* thought it strange they’d shown no signs of getting ready to leave. Now I understood why.

We didn’t know exactly when the baby would be born, but it was surely due any day now. If they went home to their territory, I gave birth the next day, and they were forced to double back...then yeah, that would be a pain. Though it wasn’t too great a distance, making the trip back and forth between Le Pied and Rohze was still exhausting, so I assumed this was an energy-conserving strategy on their part.

“You won’t have much to do here either.”

“Oh, you needn’t worry about that!” Father Fisalis assured his son. “Ever since word got out to our friends that we’d be staying here for a spell, we’ve been positively *drowning* in invitations to tea parties, soirées—you name it!”

“...I’m glad to hear you’re having fun, at least.”

Mr. Fisalis watched his parents chatter away with delight, a somewhat disapproving look on his face. Whenever they came to Rohze, those two certainly did know how to have a good time.

Since we hadn’t accounted for their extended stay, we had to let Rohtas and Cartham know before our food supply suffered a serious blow. The merchants always took off for the New Year’s holidays themselves, which meant we had to stock up on food and drink before the end of the year rolled around.

Just as I was thinking about how I would need to go looking for Rohtas later, the man himself entered the room. “Lord Fisalis, we’ve received word from your territory.”

So, about that food supply... Wait, something tells me this isn't the time for that. What's this now? Did something happen back in Le Pied?

"From our territory, you say?"

"Yes, sir. According to a messenger from Le Pied, a new discovery has been made down in the mines."

"A discovery in the mines?!" Mother and Father Fisalis cried out in sync. They rushed to skim the letter Rohtas had handed to them.

"My goodness..."

"You said it. We'd better check this out straightaway."

"Agreed."

"But I want to witness the moment my grandchild is born! Cercis—could we ask you to go to Le Pied and look into this in our stead?"

"Not a snowball's chance in hell."

"Figures!"

Mr. Fisalis's staunch refusal (which shouldn't have come as a surprise!) put a sullen look on his father's face.

"What did the letter say?"

"A digger happened upon a new cavern in the mines, and it seems there's another type of gem buried down there."

Mother Fisalis ran her eyes over the letter. Then she declared, "My, what wonderful news! Those mines are what put money in our family's pockets. It's your duty as the overseer to go see it for yourself, dear. Just think of the fortune you'll be able to leave to your grandchild if we can boost our earnings even further!"

Though her tone was matter-of-fact, a glowing smile on her face, I found myself in awe of the ex-duchess. She sure knew how to make a fast decision.

"I suppose you're right. I want to give my grandchild the world!"

And she knew how to pull her husband's strings too!

Mother Fisalis's decree was all it took to settle my in-laws' return home. They left in a hurry, keeping their packing to a minimum on the assumption that they would be back soon enough.

That took care of the food dilemma for us.

Now all that was left was to wait for the baby to come!

4. I Pulled Through!

It had been some time since Mother and Father Fisalis had rushed home to their territory, but Bitsy had yet to grace the manor.

The in-laws must have been getting pretty anxious, considering they'd send us a message to check on the situation every few days. For each one, all we could do was send back a reply of "Not yet."

I'm getting impatient to meet the little one myself. You awake in there, Bitsy?

"My tummy is sooo daaarn heavy!"

Whenever I stood up, I couldn't help muttering something along the lines of "Upsy-daisy" or "Here we go." Was I turning into an old lady over here?!

My baby bump was really starting to weigh me down, but for now, I had to accept it as the price of my future happiness and learn to live with it.

"Nevertheless, it's no good for you to sit still all day," Dahlia giggled as she helped me up from the sofa.

"True. Plus, the doctor said that staying active would get the baby here faster."

"Exactly. Though you ought to remain aware of your limits, of course."

"I know, I know!"

Dahlia gave me a preemptive lecture, knowing full well the sort of stunts I was liable to pull.

I'd learned from my last mistake. No more strenuous activity, no more fits of laughter—I didn't need to be told twice!

So as you can see, the one who was *actually* pregnant in this scenario was taking it nice and easy. But meanwhile...

"How are you feeling? If you're having a hard time, don't hesitate to say something!"

“Does your stomach hurt? Someone call for a doctor immediately! The baby could be born any second now!”

“It’s dangerous if you can’t see your feet over your belly. Oh, I know—don’t we still have that wheelchair from when your leg was injured? Why don’t you ride in that?”

There was a certain individual I could name who was going crazy with worry.

Whenever he was home, he did nothing but fret over me. It was charming, sure, but he could afford to calm down a little!

“I’m fine, Cercis,” I assured him with a strained smile.

“No, no, we mustn’t get careless! Remember last time? There’s no telling when something might happen,” he replied, dead serious. He was taking this so seriously I almost had to laugh.

“Relax. It won’t be long now before you’re a daddy, so you’ve got to pull yourself together. It’s time we learned to take things in stride.”

“Ugh... You’ve got me there.”

I could practically see the drooping ears and the tail tucked behind his legs. The fact that I found the kicked puppy look cute on him was starting to make me feel like the older one here.

He may be taking it a little far, but I am glad he’s worried about me!

Ever since my false alarm, he’d made a daily routine of telling my belly: “Make sure you’re born when Daddy is home. You hear that, Bitsy?” It had become his new morning ritual before heading out to work each day.

It was after that dream he’d had a while ago—that nightmare where our baby turned out to be a girl (still TBD), and she grew up to be the crown prince’s future queen—that he and I had taken to calling our unborn child “Bitsy.”

The reasoning behind the name was that although we didn’t know if it was going to be a “bitsy” Viola or a “bitsy” Cercis—either way, the child was going to be a miniature version of one of us. And I had to admit, the nickname had started to grow on me.

Mr. Fisalis was already going ga-ga over our kid before they’d even been born.

The sight of his devotion really tugged at my heartstrings; never had I dreamed I'd see the day, after all.

Before we'd gotten married, he'd been the sort of scoundrel who could propose a purely contractual marriage without a single crack in his smile, but the more time passed, the more he had changed. He used to only look out for number one, but somewhere along the line he'd learned to consider the people around him instead. These days, the worst he was guilty of was excessive fussing; he'd grown into a truly wonderful husband. Here's hoping he'll keep it up and grow into a good father too.

*

We'd been slowly but surely making preparations since before I'd entered the final stage of my pregnancy, so by the time Doctor Granny told us the baby might be born any day now, we had a nursery complete with a crib ready to go.

"Even looking at it in the light, it's hard to believe this crib is over twenty years old."

"It's a good quality piece, and we've done a solid job of cleaning and fixing it up," Rohtas explained to me as I admired the gorgeous antique cradle.

Get a load of this—it was the very same baby bed Mr. Fisalis had slept in as an infant! I'd found it lying around and pulled it out of storage. That's what you'd call my knack for recycling in action. The servants had touched it up for me, and now it was practically good as new.

I could tell it was well-made even in the dim light of the storage shed, but now that I'd brought it out into the light of day, the amber luster of the wood gave it a nice antique feel.

I'd also sewn the baby's clothes and diapers by hand—yet another trick I was known for.

"Infants grow out of their clothes in the blink of an eye, so it'd be a waste to buy a fancy wardrobe! Besides, hand-sewn clothes feel best against a baby's delicate skin."

"Goodness, Madam... You're so knowledgeable, it's almost hard to believe this is your first child."

“That’s what happens when a girl practically raises her brother and sister!”

Ho ho ho! I may not know much about delivering a child, but I know all about taking care of one! Not to brag, but Thistle’s and Freesia’s clothes were all made by yours truly!

Sitting alongside the maids, who were all watching me in awe, I stitched away at my future child’s clothes and undergarments.

“Master Fisalis insisted it would be easier to buy everything.”

“Is Cercis still going on about that? I’ve told him over and over that you can’t just throw money at every problem. When is he ever going to get it through his thick skull?” I muttered under my breath.

“Hee hee. He was only thinking of you, Madam; he wanted to spare you all this trouble.”

“One of these days, I’d like him to learn that money can’t buy love.”

“No need to worry. I think he is starting to realize that.”

“Maybe you’re right. He *has* changed a lot.”

“Hasn’t he just?”

My hands never stopped working for a moment while I ran my mouth. The project was going right according to schedule.

“Now that I’ve finished all the necessities, I might as well use the time to make a few extra outfits.”

“I’m impressed, Madam.”

Heh heh. I’ll have you know that this sort of thing is my specialty!

The preparations were in place. All that was left was to wait for the moment of truth.

*

The servants and I had soundly rejected Mr. Fisalis’s idiotic—*ahem*, overprotective Wheelchair Transit Plan. Instead, we came to an agreement that whenever he was home, he would personally escort me wherever I needed to go.

He turned out to be everything I could ever want from an escort; not only did he help me through the corridors, but he would even head down the stairs a few steps ahead of me and make sure that I didn't miss my footing.

Who could have guessed he was such a conscientious worrywart? I thought, once more finding myself moved by the unimaginable transformation he'd undergone since the early days of our marriage.

I mean, c'mon! Back in those days, our conversations ("business reports" might be more like it) would consist of nothing but "I spent the day doing embroidery (lie)" and "I'm glad to hear you passed the time without incident. See you," before we went our separate ways. He'd always go back to his girlfriend in the cottage without so much as a backward glance...and now look! It was too funny not to laugh.

When a grin broke out across my face as I reminisced about Mr. Fisalis's past self, he gave me a curious look from where he was walking a few steps ahead of me, holding my hand. "What's up?"

Only now that there were a few steps between us was my gaze finally level with his. He was pretty tall, after all. It wasn't often that we stood eye to eye; the sensation was a novel one, and my heart fluttered as I was reminded of just how gorgeous his deep-brown eyes were.

"Nothing."

I wasn't about to say that I was reflecting on his old ways.

"Oh, yeah...? Somehow I'm getting the feeling I shouldn't ask, so I won't."

"Good plan."

That's some sharp intuition you've got there, Mr. Fisalis!

Then, he placed a hand over my enormous belly and said his usual line (or was it a command?) to Bitsy. "Make sure you're born when Daddy's home."

"Something tells me Bitsy is dying to meet you, so I'm sure the little one will wait for you to come on out."

"Let's hope so. Though in the end, what matters most is that both you and the baby make it through okay."

“You’re such a worrywart.”

“What did you expect? I’ve told you before—this is a first for me, so it’s scary!”

“Fair enough.”

He held me in his arms and stroked my hair, and I felt I could rest easy knowing he would keep me safe.

*

“I’m off. But first—Bitsy? Try to be born when Daddy is around, okay? You have to hold off until I get home.”

“That’s asking a lot... I’m not sure the baby has control over that, Cercis.”

I saw Mr. Fisalis off once he’d performed his daily ritual (by which I mean his unrealistic demands). I then returned to the parlor with Rohtas, Dahlia, and the rest of the servants who had bid him farewell, and together we got started on the day’s work.

My belly had grown too cumbersome for me to move around much, of course, so I was banned from roaming the manor in my maid uniform for the time being. I was to sit still and continue working on the preparations for the baby’s arrival.

“Why don’t we finish sewing the diapers today?”

“Good idea. A little one can never have enough undergarments!”

“Right? It doesn’t take long for a baby to get them all dirty.”

“Precisely! You’re such an expert on this, Madam.”

“Heh heh. What can I say? Looking after my little brother and sister gave me a lot of practice.”

“I can tell!”

It happened in the middle of that conversation with Mimosa, just as I’d picked up my needle and fabric.

Cramp.

“Hm?”

My stomach felt strange all of a sudden.

I put down the needle I was holding and placed a hand over my belly. It felt tight. Almost like something was stretching me out from the inside—or perhaps a dull ache was a better way to describe it.

“Is something the matter?” Mimosa asked, peering into my face with concern when she noticed I had stopped working to touch my stomach.

“I don’t know. I’m getting the same feeling I had the other day.”

“Does it hurt?”

“Hmm... I wouldn’t say—”

Just as I was determining whether I would classify the sensation as painful or not, I was hit with an even more intense wave of agony.

“Aghhhh! Yes, it definitely hurts!”

“What?!”

“Are you all right?!”

It was so painful that I curled up on the spot, clutching my abdomen. Mimosa and the rest of the maids were dismayed by this sudden turn of events.

Holy smokes, does my stomach hurt! Can someone please explain...just kidding, I’m good! Man, the pain doesn’t even compare to those false contractions!

“Agh! I can’t breathe!”

“Easy, Madam! Relax. You’re going to be okay.”

While I crouched and groaned in pain, Dahlia began firing off orders from behind me. “There’s a good chance you’re going into labor for real this time. Someone find one of the male servants and have him carry Madam Fisalis to her bedroom! Ria, go get Cartham. You stay here with the madam, Mimosa. I’ll track down Rohtas.”

“Yes, ma’am!” the maids replied.

I was in too much torment to feel like moving anywhere...but giving birth right there in the parlor would've been a lot more trouble for everyone! I had to keep it together.

"It's okay... Once I've collected myself, I can walk to the bedroom on my own..."

"Please don't push yourself, Madam. Just wait until Cartham gets here. Shall I help you lie down?"

As I did nothing but moan, paralyzed with agony, Mimosa gently laid me down on the sofa.

"I'll carry her to her room," said Rohtas when he made it to the parlor one step ahead of Cartham. "Dahlia, go call for the doctor."

"Right away."

The butler then picked me up in his arms and carried me off to the bedroom. *And when my weight is at an all-time personal high too... I feel bad imposing on him.*

I appreciated how he made sure to handle me with care without letting that slow him down. What a perfect gentleman he was.

While he was carrying me to the bedroom, Dahlia had run off to call for the doctor.

By the time I was laid down atop the bed, the worst of it had subsided. I could hardly believe that I'd been in too much pain to breathe only moments ago.

"Uh-oh. After all this fuss, what if it turns out to be a false alarm again?"

That would be such a pain in the butt for everyone else! And I'd feel super embarrassed for making such a big deal about it.

But Mimosa only said, "*Non, non!*" with a wag of her finger. "If it is, no one will mind. But we're better off taking it seriously in case it *is* the real thing, no? Let's keep a cool head about this."

The familiar dulcet lilt to her voice was nowhere to be heard. Her tone was authoritative, speaking to her wealth of experience.

“Good point. We won’t know for sure until we wait and see.”

“Exactly. You should focus on conserving your energy for now; better safe than sorry, after all.”

“Okay. I’ll take it easy.”

“Oh, and since there’s no telling how long the pain will go on, you ought to eat a little something while you still can.”

“Do I have to...? I’m not really hungry. And what do you mean, there’s no telling how long it’ll last?”

“To my understanding, it varies from person to person. But just think—once you make it past the agony, your baby will be waiting for you on the other side. Hang in there.”

“I see... So the pain isn’t going to let up any time soon... And when it reaches its peak, that’s when my baby will be born.”

Uh, hold on—that sounds terrifying, actually.

I shuddered to imagine how bad the apex of my suffering was going to be.

“Exactly! That’s why you need to relax and save up your strength while you’re feeling some relief. You ought to, I don’t know...have a bite of something easy to digest!”

“Seriously...? I don’t think so.”

Eat something? That’s asking a lot of me at the moment. But wow... I may have plenty of knowledge when it comes to raising kids, but I’m definitely a novice when it comes to childbirth. I’ll do what I can to save my strength, but I don’t think I can handle food.

“Anything will do. Fruit, a sandwich—you name it.”

“I’ll take the fruit, then.”

I went ahead and requested some fruit. I wasn’t sure whether I’d be able to keep it down or not, but I had to at least try for Bitsy’s sake.

For a while after that, the sharp flashes of pain would ebb just as soon as they’d come...and rinse and repeat. Unlike during my false alarm, the intervals

between the bouts were indeed getting shorter and shorter.

“I know it hurts, but try not to tense up. Take deep breaths.”

“Hee-hee-hoo! Hee-hee-hoo!”

“That’s too fast! Slow it down a little.”

Doctor Granny had rushed over as soon as she got the word, and now she was by my side, instructing me in gentle tones. But as much as I hated to ignore her advice, I was in way too much pain for that! It was impossible not to brace myself.

“You’re going to be all right,” she assured me, at times giving my hand a firm squeeze, at others calming me down with gentle caresses.

I’m sorry. I know this isn’t the time to be saying I can’t do this or that; I have to do what the doctor says.

“Hoo...”

“That’s it. Nice and slow.”

In too much agony to even think, I focused every last ounce of my attention on the midwife’s words. Otherwise, I could’ve very well passed out from the pain.

The lulls between flare-ups were growing ever shorter, and by now I was pretty much in a constant state of anguish. I had no idea how much time had even passed. I was already spent, teetering on the verge of losing consciousness.

I can’t believe how many people I know have gone through all this torture. I’m more grateful to my mother than ever!

Just as I felt myself hitting the limits of my physical stamina and mental willpower, I heard, “You’re almost there. Hang on just a little bit longer.”

“What?!”

My stomach hurt so bad that it had dulled the rest of my senses, so I had no idea how close “almost there” actually was.

When I gave a push at the doctor’s command and found myself assailed by a

fresh wave of pain, I was positive I'd reached the end of my rope.

But then...I was met with the sound of a tiny cry.

"The baby is here. It's a darling little girl."

The doctor's voice was the last thing I heard before I blacked out.

5. It's a Girl

I gave it everything I had (by my standards, anyway). The pain was unlike anything I'd ever felt before, but I pulled through knowing Bitsy (name TBD) would be waiting for me when it was all said and done.

After struggling and struggling and then struggling a little more, I was greeted by a vigorous cry and Doctor Granny's voice declaring, "It's a girl!" Just hearing that was enough to make everything I'd gone through feel worth it. Now I understood what my in-laws were thinking when they said the gender didn't matter as long as the baby came out healthy and strong.

I was truly, truly grateful that she had been born without incident. And though I was too exhausted to so much as lift a finger, I seemed to be doing all right myself.

Will Mr. Fisalis be happy with a girl, though? Speaking of which, I don't see him anywhere, so I hope someone remembered to tell him. Either way, the fact that he's not here must mean he didn't make it in time... Fingers crossed he's not too torn up about missing the big moment. Here he was always telling my tummy, "Make sure to wait until Daddy gets home," but it ended up happening almost right after he'd left for work.

All sorts of thoughts ran through my head in a daze, and before I knew it, I'd drifted off to sleep.

What mattered right now was that I was tired. There was only one word to describe me in that moment: exhausted.

*

"...Vi... Vi..."

"Hm...?"

Oh... I hear someone calling out to me. Umm, what was I doing again? Oh, right—I just had my baby. My brain's so foggy that I can't even remember things right.

Last thing I remember, I was so bushed I fell right asleep. Or I lost consciousness, if we want to get pedantic. Right now, the person calling my name is...Mr. Fisalis, I think? I guess he ditched work to come home. Earlier I was worried nobody had let him know, but he'd never let that fly. Of course he'd make sure someone would contact him, so he must have headed back as soon as he heard.

I cracked my eyes open, and the first thing to enter my vision were his dark-brown eyes swimming with concern. *Yeah, I knew it was him.*

He was kneeling beside my bed, holding my hand in his.

"Cercis... Are you done with work for the day?"

"Not exactly. I left as soon as I got the news."

"What about your duties?"

"Don't worry; I have Corydalis slaving away as we speak."

Called that one! I know this is par for the course, but I'm sorry you're stuck with a guy like this for a boss, Corydalis! And that you're stuck with him for a master, Stellaria!

I inwardly apologized to Corydalis and Stellaria.

Though he deserved a lecture for shirking his duties, I couldn't deny it made me happy to see that he cared even more about me than his super important job. (But I still felt sorry for Corydalis!)

Knowing Mr. Fisalis, he must have bolted right out of there.

Our little talk about him abandoning his responsibilities would have to wait until later, though. There were bigger things to be worrying about right now.

"Did you see the baby?"

"Yeah. She's a pretty little girl, that one."

"I'm sorry I couldn't give you a boy. But she's in good shape, at least."

I know he said he didn't care about the gender before she was born, but is he disappointed now that it's actually turned out to be a girl? I wondered to myself, feeling a little discouraged.

Yet all Mr. Fisalis said to me was, “Thanks for giving us a healthy child.”

He beamed at me, the look in his gorgeous chocolate-brown eyes softening. It was almost too dazzling a sight for my weary eyes—*ahem*, I mean, scratch that part! The smile stretching across his features was really as gentle as could be. It was like his entire being was emanating an aura of joy.

Good. He’s just as happy about this as I am.

“By the way, I don’t *think* I saw you around when the baby came, but did you manage to make it in time?”

“Well, about that...”

“About that?”

“When the courier arrived from the manor, I happened to be in the middle of a royal council. It was the exact *wrong* moment to take the message!”

“Oh no... Bad timing, huh?”

“You said it. Once the meeting was done, I read his note and dropped everything to get here, but I ended up missing the main event by a hair.”

“Ack...”

“I heard her first cry from the other side of the door, at least.”

“Hmm... It’s tough to say whether that counts as being here for it or not.”

“It clearly doesn’t! I can see that girl’s got an attitude problem already, disobeying her father from the very moment she’s born! No, wait... Since she made the delivery easy on her mother, perhaps she’s a good girl, after all?”

“Aha ha ha ha!”



Mr. Fisalis's sullen grumblings had me cracking up.

A safe delivery makes her a pretty good girl in my book!

"Did that really count as an 'easy' delivery, though? It was awful! I'm telling you, it hurt so bad I thought the world was going to end!"

Though I indignantly protested that nothing that painful should be considered "easy," Mr. Fisalis replied, "Apparently that *was* easy, going by what the doctor said. It didn't take much time either."

"What, really? Now that you mention it, I have no idea what time it is right now."

"It's just past noon."

Now *that* answer I hadn't seen coming.

What? That's it?!

"Huh? It's still afternoon?! Wow, I lost all sense of time..."

I knew the mind-numbing pain had probably messed with my perceptions, but I never would have guessed so little time had passed. I was shocked to hear how early in the day it was.

"According to Dahlia, you went into labor almost immediately after I left, and the birth went smoothly from there."

"Seriously...? I could've sworn it took longer than that."

I watched Mr. Fisalis leave for work, started having contractions right afterwards, fought and fought, and yet it was still only midday? What felt like an eternity to me had only lasted half a day at most?!

My suffering aside, no wonder that was classified as an easy delivery.

"That's precisely why I didn't make it here in time."

Now it was Mr. Fisalis's turn to be indignant. I could see he was holding a grudge over the fact that we'd failed to wait for him.

"Speaking of which... After all those times you told her to 'wait for Daddy,' she went ahead without you anyway, huh? Hee hee... I bet she was itching to

meet you that much sooner, that's all."

"Sure, let's go with that."

*

While I was talking with my husband, the servants tended to our baby's every need, giving the little one her first bath and wrapping her up in the swaddling clothes I'd sewn. Dahlia, Stellaria, and the rest of the maids continued to scurry this way and that, carrying out the doctor's orders.

I waited there with bated breath until at last Dahlia brought in the baby, fully clothed and ready to face the world, and laid her down beside me.

Her eyes were shut in a peaceful sleep, her miniature hands curled into fists. Even as tiny as she was, it was still hard to believe I'd carried a girl of her size in my belly. And it was equally hard to believe that such an eensy-weensy thing had let out such a strong, powerful cry.

Only now did a surge of emotion finally creep over me. Earlier, I'd been too occupied with battling pain and fatigue to process anything happening.

She's so small and cute.

Seeing as I'd passed out immediately after giving birth, it felt like I was meeting her for the very first time.

Hi there, little Bitsy!

"Her hair is just like her father's—a beautiful dark-brown."

Her eyes were shut in sleep, framed by long lashes, so we couldn't tell what color they were just yet. Between her plump and rosy cheeks, her perfectly full lips, and her unblemished fair skin, she was a pretty little thing. Why, yes, I *am* patting myself on the back here—problem?

"But I'd say she takes after you overall," Mr. Fisalis remarked as he peered down into her face.

"Please no—I'd feel terrible for her! Let's pray she inherited your looks!"

Mr. Fisalis refrained from commenting.

Destined to be a plain Jane from the moment she's born? That would be way

too cruel a fate!

*

“What should we name her?” I wondered.

The Fisalis family is a prestigious line of dukes, so is there extra pomp and circumstance around choosing a name?

“Does the Fisalis family traditionally hold naming ceremonies? Mine never has,” I added.

“Don’t worry. We don’t really do that either.”

Whew, so at least that’s not a Fisalis custom. I’m glad, because that would’ve been a pain in the butt.

“Have you come up with any potential names, Cercis?”

“A few... What about you, Vi?”

“No, sorry. I was too busy with everything else to give it much thought.”

It wasn’t that long ago that I’d been angsty over the succession crisis, and more recently, I’d spent all my time praying for a safe delivery. A name had been the last thing on my mind.

“So? What did you have in mind?” I asked him.

“I mean, it’s just an idea...”

“An idea is fine! Let’s hear it.”

His eyes flitted about nervously at first, but he steeled his nerves in the face of my pestering. “Now, keep in mind that this is only a personal opinion...but I always thought that Viol would be a good name for a boy, and Violet worked for a girl.”

There was my competent knight of a husband in action—for “just an idea,” he’d really done his homework. He’d even thought of a name for both a boy and a girl.

But c’mon, “Viol”...? You could’ve gotten a little more creative with that one. Knowing Mr. Fisalis, he just wanted to name the kid after me.

“Violet...”

“Yeah. Named after you.”

Nevermind. That went for both options. Still, “Violet” has a pretty ring to it! I like it!

I was immediately taken with Mr. Fisalis’s choice of baby name.

“Well, we’ve got ourselves a girl, so Violet it is!”

The snap decision on my part made his eyes widen with surprise. “Are you sure, Vi? Like I said, that was just what I—”

“It’s a cute name! I like it. And if we call her Violet...then Lettie would make a good nickname.”

For whatever reason, something about Violet just *felt* right to me.

“Violet” already sounds cute, and “Lettie” is even cuter! All right—that settles it!

“Then shall I take it you’re a fan of the idea, Vi?”

“Yeah! Violet—what a lovely, adorable name for our daughter. Now I just *know* she’ll grow up into a real beauty!”

But only if she gets all her looks from her father’s side of the family, mind you!

*

Now that we had a name, it was time to put everything we had into raising her!

“We have a lot of experienced parents hanging around the manor, so I’m sure they’ll be able to give us some tips. Right, Dahlia?” Mr. Fisalis asked the maid.

She smiled. “Of course, Master.”

“Looking after Thistle and Freesia gave me plenty of experience of my own, I’ll have you know!”

“Taking care of a sibling and taking care of a daughter are two very different things.”

“Well, okay... Maybe you have a point. For a start, one is a lot more

responsibility than the other. We sure are lucky we've got everyone else to help us out!"

It wasn't just Dahlia; even as new to the parenting gig as she was, Mimosa had debuted as a mother to rave reviews. Those first-class servants of ours were unparalleled in every respect! How impressive was it that they could spot us even in the child-rearing department?

"I was considering asking Mimosa to be Viola and Violet's personal nanny. What do you think, Dahlia?" my husband went on to ask.

I was aghast. *A nanny? Doesn't that mean Mimosa would be the one raising Violet? I have no plans to do any socializing in the near future, so I can handle all the mothering myself, thank you very much!*

"Excuse me, Cercis? I don't need a nanny to look after my own daughter."

"I knew you'd say that. But 'nanny' is just a title, Vi; you're free to treat her more like an aide for when you're tired or having a tough time. Besides, every now and then you're bound to have a social obligation you can't get out of, right? Think of her as a babysitter for times like that."

"Oh... So being a mom won't fly as an excuse to retire from the social scene, huh?"

"Nope. Don't even try it."

"...Yes, sir."

*

And so, the latest baby to be born to the Fisalis manor ended up being named Violet. Something told me she was about to make life around the mansion twice—no, *ten* times more exciting.

6. One Big Happy Violet-Loving Family

The Fisalis couple's long-awaited baby was a girl. It didn't take long for the little one—dubbed “Violet” at Mr. Fisalis's suggestion—to bring everyone in the manor under her spell.

“...and that about covers the story of how you were born.”

“Ohhh...”

Violet had politely listened to the whole story from her daddy's lap, but I had my doubts about how much she'd understood.

“All you need to know is that your mommy worked very hard to bring you into the world.”

“Huh. Okay.”

“She's too young to get it, Cercis.”

“I disagree. Now's the time to teach her that she was important enough to be worth all that suffering.”

“Oh, that's an interesting way to think of it!”

“Huh?” dropped from Violet's mouth.

This was one of Mr. Fisalis special lessons in love for our gifted little girl.

As he explained his reasoning, he brushed back her hair with a gentle, heart-melting smile. *Aww. I have a feeling your love already comes through loud and clear, dear!*

“Were Mommy and Daddy the only ones happy I was born?”

Here comes her next well-meaning question!

The answer, of course, was a resounding no. Why, you could argue that the rest of the manor was even more thrilled than we were!

“Not at all,” Mr. Fisalis replied. “Everyone you know—and even some you don't—was simply delighted. There was no shortage of fanfare.”

“Huh?”

“Was that too difficult? In that case, why don’t I go ahead and tell you the next part of the story?”

“Okay!”

Violet adjusted herself in her father’s lap, eager to listen to the rest of his tale.

*

It was the same evening Violet was born. My parents; my young brother, Thistle; and my younger sister, Freesia, had all come to visit.

“Your staff *did* take care to send us the play-by-play, for the record.”

“But we didn’t want to barge in on you when you were struggling through labor, so we decided to wait until we got news that the child had been born.”

“I came *this* close to getting left behind,” complained Thistle, casting my parents a meaningful glance. He had to have been at school for most of this, after all. I was glad they’d managed to come as a family unit.

“So, tell us about the baby!”

“She’s a healthy little girl.”

I pointed to the crib next to my bed, where Violet lay fast asleep.

Freesia rushed right over. “She’s soooo cute!”

This was her first time seeing a child younger than she was, and she looked down at Violet with stars in her eyes. The way she was leaning over the edge of the crib was no less cute than the baby she was peering down at, as was her obliviousness to the warm feelings she inspired in everyone watching her.

“You’re a big sister now, Freesia. You can go ahead and call her ‘Lettie.’”

“I’m her big sis?”

“That’s right.”

Technically she’s Violet’s aunt, but Freesia’s way too young for that title!

Freesia, who was at the age where nothing seemed cooler than a big sister, seemed delighted by the news that she had become one herself. Her eyes were

sparkling.

Unable to contain her joy, she called out to the still-sleeping baby. "Lettie! Hey, Lettie, I'm your big sis, Freesia!"

Thistle watched Freesia with a smile. For him, Violet's birth was like gaining a second little sister.

"I hope you'll think of her as a sister too, Thistle."

"I do! I'm looking forward to playing with her lots."

"We'd love that. You can feel free to come over anytime you like. Right, Cercis?" I asked, flicking my gaze to where my husband stood beside the bed.

"...Sure."

What was that pause for?

We'd also sent word to my in-laws as soon as Violet was born, but they lived half a day's journey from Rohze. It wasn't until nighttime that they got the message, and at that point it was too late for them to depart safely; we received a reply that they would leave early the next morning.

And so it was that Mother and Father Fisalis came by the following afternoon.

"Oh, Vi, I'm so proud of you! You did a great job!"

"It must have been rough on you, no?" said Father Fisalis. Then, just as I was about to get to my feet, he insisted, "No, no, stay where you are."

I hadn't left bed since Doctor Granny told me to get some rest and concern myself with nothing but the baby for a bit. Even when it was time to eat, the maids would carry the meals to my room. "Take care to eat plenty of good food, Madame! Motherhood is a test of endurance!" Cartham had said as he whipped me up even tastier meals than his usual fare.

I'd assumed it would be rude to stay in bed now that my in-laws were here, but if dad was offering me an out, I was happy to take him up on that.

"She's adorable! Her hair looks just like Cercis's. What about her eyes?" Mother Fisalis asked as she peered at the sleeping Violet through the bars of her crib. I could tell she was itching to pick the baby up and get right to

cuddling.

“Her eyes are the same beautiful brown as his.”

She’d opened her eyes a few times by now, and we’d discovered they were the same dark-brown hue as my husband’s.

“I see! Goodness, I can’t wait to see for myself.”

“That makes them the same color as mine too,” Father Fisalis said, excitedly pointing to his own eyes. He seemed happy to have found something in common with his granddaughter.

“Gosh, you’re right! Aren’t you glad she takes after you, Grandpa?”

“Very much so.”

Mother and Father Fisalis squealed with delight. They’d already become the picture of two doting grandparents.

“How long will it take her to say ‘Granny,’ do you think?”

“Oh, she could ask her ‘Grandpa’ for anything and I’d give it to her in a heartbeat!”

“I totally get that! I’m feeling the same way!”

“I hope she starts talking soon!” their voices rang out in unison.

They were going so crazy with excitement that I was having a hard time keeping up.

Uh, considering she was literally born yesterday, it’s going to be a while before she’s saying anyone’s names... But man, it seems like a crime to have a “Granny” this young and beautiful.

“The color of her features might be the same as mine, but their shape is closer to yours. I can’t wait to see how she turns out,” had been Mr. Fisalis’s say on the matter, but I was confident she’d be prettier if she ended up taking after her father. *Sorry for the bad genes, Violet!*

*

It was too soon after the birth to allow visits from anyone other than family, but to make up for it, we were bombarded with congratulatory gifts from

everybody under the sun. Leave it to the most distinguished noble family in the Flür Kingdom to end up sitting on a mountain of presents. From the looks of things, they were pouring in from the royal palace, the rest of the noble houses, and every other corner of the nation.

“We’ve just received a gift from the Argenteia family, Madam.”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

“In addition, we have one from Verbena of the Argenteia family.”

“What? A separate one?!”

“There’s one from Celosia—”

“I’ve heard enough about the Argenteias, thank you.”

It sounded like Verbena and Celosia had sent us presents independent of their father, the duke of Argenteia. So had Miss Iris and the rest of the quartet, of course. I was pretty sure this was even more gifts than we’d gotten for our wedding.

The pile of boxes in the corner of the room was growing bigger and bigger.

“Now this is a strangely familiar sight,” I muttered aloud.

“As I recall, you received a comparable amount of wedding gifts, Madam,” Mimosa replied, gazing up at the present pile.

Yeah, that’s what it reminded me of. But at least no one sent us a salmon-eating bear figurine this time, right?

“There’s no wood carving, no, but there *is* a teddy bear,” said Rohtas, as though he’d read my mind.

“We’ve transitioned to stuffed animals now?!”

I didn’t see that one coming! It would seem Lord Salmon-Eating Bears has broadened his horizons. Hmm... This would make for a way more comfortable boundary line! It’s a lot more practical than the wood carving ver—wait, something tells me that’s not what it’s supposed to be used for.

“The way you’re grinning at the plush is starting to concern me, Madam.”

“Oopsie! My mind was wandering to all the different ways I could use this

little guy. Old habits die hard and all that. Ha ha!”

“I had a feeling!”

Mimosa looked between me and the teddy bear and giggled. She’d read me like a book.

“Once I have a moment to spare, I’ll have to get to writing thank-you letters.”

“No need to rush this time! You’re supposed to take it easy during the postnatal period.”

“I know, I know!”

I’d gotten to work on the last batch of thank-you notes so quickly because I’d had no shortage of time on my hands when I first got married. (In fact, I’d been thrilled to have something to do.) Now, by contrast, I had my hands full taking care of Violet.

I had to breastfeed her every few hours, change her dirty diapers, and cradle her and lull her to sleep when she was getting cranky. I’d assumed that caring for Thistle and Freesia would have prepared me for this, but babysitting a sibling couldn’t compare to raising your own child.

Being a new mother really was a full-time job.

Mimosa and Dahlia were perfectly willing to help me out, of course, but I wanted to be the one responsible for her. I was even doing my best to wake up in the middle of the night!

*

Seven days had passed since Violet was born. I was starting to spend more and more time out of bed. If nothing else, I was at least back to taking my meals in the dining room.

My parents-in-law were still staying in the cottage, making the most of their life in the capital. The last time they’d visited, they’d been forced to cancel all their fun plans when they rushed home to their territory on urgent business. Once they’d returned, they’d been flooded with more than enough invitations to make up for lost time; they didn’t have a spare moment to complain about being bored.

“I’d rather stay home with Lettie than go anywhere,” they’d always say but ultimately hit the road so as not to waste the opportunity. As soon as they made it back to the mansion, however, they’d head straight to wherever Violet was and shower her in attention.

“Look, Lettie! Look!” Father Fisalis cooed, shaking a rattle in his hand.

Violet groaned, her face turning red. The moment Mother Fisalis noticed that, she said, “Oh dear, did you get your diaper all dirty? Here, let Nana change those for you. Dahlia, could you bring me a fresh diaper?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“I can take care of it, Mother!” I protested.

“Oh, don’t you worry your pretty little head over it! It’s only while I’m here. Once I head home, I won’t be seeing this little one for a while. Isn’t that right, Lettie?”

I rushed to step in before Mother Fisalis was stuck on diaper duty, but she only laughed and brushed me off. She took care of the task swiftly and skillfully. Her diaper-changing technique had been a touch awkward at first, but she’d learned the ropes in no time. I could tell she’d never done this sort of thing for Mr. Fisalis...but that was a thought for another time.

Is it my daughterly duty here to shut my mouth and let them do their thing?

Mother Fisalis went back to cradling Violet in her arms, the baby’s diapers changed and her mood salvaged. While I was watching this, Dahlia whispered to me, “I think I know why she’s so eager—she rarely had the chance to care for Master Fisalis herself.”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yes, ma’am. She and Lord Fisalis were always so busy.”

I nodded. “Oh, now I see...”

Now that she mentioned it, I recalled hearing that Mr. Fisalis hadn’t been spoiled much as a child. It was hard to imagine, seeing what his parents were like now—but I was sure it was something that weighed on their conscience to this day.

Then by all means, make up for lost time with Violet. With an exception for breastfeeding, of course, I don't mind sitting on my hands for a bit.

*

We had dinner as a family when Mr. Fisalis got home from work, then went to relax in the parlor. While we sipped our tea, Violet entertained herself in the extra crib set up beside us. Though in this instance, “entertaining herself” meant nothing more than sucking on her fingers.

“By the way, Father, I’ve been wondering... How are the ruby mines doing? Based on the reports, I’ve gotten the impression that gems have been in short supply lately. If that’s true, we ought to make up the difference with our sapphires and—”

Mr. Fisalis was in the midst of discussing our territory’s mines with his father. I recalled him debating the matter with Rohtas when they’d looked over the materials a little while back.

“Perhaps it would be faster to ask my father in person.”

“Will you pay him a visit in Le Pied, then?”

“No—I can’t afford to leave Rohze at the moment. There’s no telling when Viola might give birth.”

It had gone something like that, anyway.

Now that his father had conveniently come to him, he’d taken advantage of the opportunity to pull out the documents.

“No need to worry about that. We’re working to develop a new ruby mine, and there’s been a temporary drop in production while we refocus our efforts—that’s all. Besides, the sapphires are as bountiful as ever.”

“Oh, so *that’s* the issue. Next time you do something like that, be sure to inform me!”

“O-Of course, son. Sorry about that.”

It was so rare to see his son voice a strong opinion that Father Fisalis shrunk back. The sight of it had Mother Fisalis’s shoulders shaking with mirth. *Come on, your son is trying to take his job seriously! You shouldn’t laugh!*

The father and son put their heads together, and the mother looked on. They were the picture of a happy family.

Just as this feel-good scene was getting me feeling warm and fuzzy, Mr. Fisalis looked over at me. “Hey, Vi. Once we’re done with this conversation, shall I put Lettie to bed?”

It was almost Violet’s bedtime.

“I’ll take care of it! You should focus on getting your work done.”

I appreciate the sentiment, but shouldn’t your job take precedence right now? Father Fisalis won’t stay in Rohze forever.

“Don’t be silly—I can’t saddle you with all the parenting! Besides, I want *my* chance to spend some one-on-one time with Lettie.”

So he insisted, but he already took care of Violet—namely by tucking her into bed—whenever he had a moment to spare.

“Would you mind handling it, then?”

“Not at all. Here, let me wrap up this discussion and—”

Just as Mr. Fisalis went to resume the talk with his father, there came a whimper that turned into a wail.

Violet had kept quiet thus far, but now her mood was taking a turn for the worse. *Uh oh, is she that sleepy?*

She wasn’t going to hold out long enough for Mr. Fisalis to finish up his work. I was better off taking her up to her room myself.

But the moment I got up from the sofa to gather her in my arms, I heard Rohtas call out to Violet from beside her, picking up the rattle next to her crib and giving it a few shakes. “Feeling a widdle grumpy, Miss Lettie? Are your diapers all icky? Or is it time to go beddy-bye?”



Rohtas?! Did I just hear you say “widdle”?!

I could feel the whole room’s eyes on him. Everyone else was probably thinking the same thing I was.

We were all staring at Rohtas, our jaws on the floor—and that went for Mr. Fisalis, his father, his mother, the servants...and me too, of course. Yet the butler in question was oblivious as he continued to smile and fuss over Violet.

Help! This is too funny!

When he finally noticed that everyone had stopped talking, he lifted his head and instantly deduced the reason for the silence.

Don’t think we didn’t see that look of “oh crap” that passed over your face!

But Rohtas was ever the professional. He didn’t take long to settle back into his trademark poker face and clear his throat. “Shall I take Miss Lettie to her room?” he asked me, still frozen in place on my way off the sofa.

Oh no. I’m so close to cracking up. But if I do laugh at him, something tells me there’ll be hell to pay during my next training session. Hold it together, Viola!

“Ahem... Uh, Cercis can handle it, so...pfft...”

Nope, can’t do it. It’s so obvious I’m trying to hold it in. My eyes are watering!

“I’m done here, so I can take her,” said Mr. Fisalis, an unabashed grin spreading over his face. *Welp. That’s an extra workload for him.*

“Gosh, Rohtas! You’re as big a sucker for Lettie as the rest of us!”

“I get it, Rohtas—I really do! I have to keep a handle on myself or I might crack and coo, “Pop-Pop wuvs you!””

No comment from the butler.

“Don’t sweat it. Lettie’s just that adorable.”

“Don’t be shy, my good man! Humor the little girl as much as you like.”

And again, no comment.

Mother and Father Fisalis certainly are a force to be reckoned with. Cercis and I would never dream of messing with Rohtas, and here they are laughing their

butts off at him!

My in-laws' teasing had the rest of the servants shaking with silent laughter. And to think they'd been trying so hard to pretend nothing happened only moments ago.

I had to hand it to Rohtas for sitting through their ridicule with a totally straight face. Why, he was already back in the usual swing of things...or maybe not quite. I could see a vein popping out on his forehead.

That's enough, guys! I don't want to know what's going to happen if this keeps up!

Mr. Fisalis and I watched the three of them, restraining ourselves from laughing at all costs.

That was the one and only day we got to see this rare side of Rohtas. Never again would we spot a crack in his composure!

7. Life with Lettie

We were so busy looking after Violet day in and day out that the month following her birth positively *flew* by. She grew up fast and healthily; her wrinkled face and limbs had filled out into something more chubby and baby-like, and she'd started moving around and showing emotion on her face. Her cuteness factor was double—no, *quadruple* what it used to be!

I saw her everyday, and still I never got tired of watching her. Babies had a mysterious sort of charisma, to be sure.

“Watching her grow with each passing day is a wonder and a joy,” my husband said, just as pleased to see her blossoming as I was.

Though he'd always been sure to give me a hug when he came home from work, giving one to Violet became a new addition to his routine.

*

Mother and Father Fisalis eventually went home to their territory, and life returned to normal around the manor. My days as a bedridden shut-in behind me, I was slowly but surely getting back into the usual swing of things.

“Man, I’ve gotten so out of shape. I’d kill to fluff some laundry right about now!”

“Let’s save that for after you’ve broken in your body, shall we?”

Alas, resuming my life as a servant wasn’t quite in the cards yet. The maids were doing everything in their power to rein me in, so I had no choice but to drop the idea. Instead, I warmed myself up with lighter exercises, such as taking Violet for walks around the garden.

Pushing around the baby carriage Bellis had made for her, I hummed a happy tune as we strolled among the flowers.

And guess what? The carriage had the same design as Daisy’s!

Since Daisy was old enough to sit upright, hers was more of a stroller, while

the newborn Violet rode in a pram. Come to think of it, Bellis had also been the one to make me that wheelchair when my leg got injured. What a great handyman we had around the house!

As long as I picked a nice time of day—neither too hot nor too cold—basking in the sun and enjoying a spot of tea out in my personal garden was another great way to spend the time.

One day, I was in the middle of a tea party with Mimosa, Daisy, Stellaria, and a few other maids, when Rohtas came from the mansion with a sealed letter in hand. “There’s a letter for you, Madam.”

“A letter? From who?”

“It’s from one of Master Fisalis’s co-workers. One of the female knights, to be exact.”

“Oh, one of the Bombshell Trio, I assume? Thanks.”

I took the message off his hands.

Letters had begun pouring in as soon as the worst of the post-delivery chaos died down. A lot of “How are you holding up? We’d like to stop by for a visit soon.”-type stuff.

It wasn’t just the chivalric order’s Bombshell Trio that had reached out. I’d likewise gotten letters from close friends of mine like Miss Iris and Miss Verbena. More than a few, I might add.

I asked Mr. Fisalis for permission to have them over each time one of those requests came in, but he’d always shoot me down with “Lettie’s still too young for that.” If you asked *me*, however, we were well past the point where it might have been an issue.

So I thought to myself as I tore open the letter, and lo, the contents were exactly what I’d expected.

“It says, ‘We’d like to come for a visit. When would work best on your end?’ Sounds like the ladies are itching to meet Lettie.”

“So it would seem.”

Reading between the lines, “When would work best on your end?” translated

to “We’re not going to take no for an answer.”

“I’ll ask Cercis about it when he gets home.”

If he says no again, I could always have them sneak over while he’s out of the house. He and the girls work the same hours, but hmm... I wouldn’t put it past them to show up declaring, “No problem! We took the day off!”

*

Evening fell.

Though he’d left the house in good spirits that morning, Cercis came home with despair written all over his face. Something must have happened at work.

“I’m home...”

“Cercis?! What happened?”

Worried he was feeling under the weather, I rushed over to him and put a hand to his forehead. He didn’t seem to be running a fever.

“Are you feeling sick? Should I call a doctor?”

Now that I’m getting a better look at his face, hmm... He looks like death, sure, but I don’t think it’s from physical distress.

“No... I’m fine. Yeah. Absolutely fine. Anyway, why don’t we head inside?” he said, his gait unsteady as he led the way. He didn’t have an ounce of his usual pep. Worst of all, he hadn’t even given Violet her hug yet! Seriously, was he okay?!

I handed Violet off to Mimosa before I placed a hand against his back, falling into step beside him as I guided him toward the parlor.

But moments later...

“Wait, a business trip?”

“...Yeah.”

Seriously? That’s why you look like your whole world came crashing down around you?

The two of us had settled down on the sofa; after a few sips of the pick-me-up

drink the maids had brought out for him, a bit of the color had returned to his cheeks. Just as a wave of relief washed over me, the first words to escape his lips had been: “Business trip.”

You’re all doom and gloom over one dumb work trip? His aversion to travel is still in full effect, I see.

“When do you leave?”

“The day after tomorrow. I’ll be gone for seven days or so.”

“Only seven days? Why, it’ll be over before you know it!”

“Hardly. As far as I’m concerned, that might as well be a year.”

“Oh, c’mon, it’s not *that* bad!”

For something that was only going to take a week, he was taking it pretty hard.

“I won’t be able to see you and Lettie for seven whole days! I can’t imagine anything worse,” he argued. He stood up, took Violet out of Mimosa’s hands, and held her tight against his chest.

Cercis, please. It’s not like you’re never going to see us...hm?

It was as I was watching him with an emotion halfway to exasperation that a sudden possibility occurred to me—a possibility that involved his position as the “brains” of the chivalric order.

Typically, his job was to keep the royal family safe as a member of the Royal Guard, but that was just a front. Behind the scenes, he was running the same intelligence operations he always had. Though high-risk missions were less frequent than they used to be, he was still bound to get sent on them from time to time.

Don’t tell me... Is this trip going to be a really dangerous one? Is that why he’s so miserable?!

“C-Cercis...”

“Huh? Say what? What’s gotten into *you* all of a sudden?” Mr. Fisalis was startled to see the color drain from my face.

“Is...is this business trip—no, this *mission*—going to be a dangerous one?” I asked him, bracing myself for the worst case scenario.

And yet.

“Not particularly? Babysitting the prince is going to be a drag, but there won’t be much risk involved.”

EXCUSE ME?! Don’t you give me that blank, “where-did-this-come-from” look! I mentally tore into him.

“So you’re going away to serve as the prince’s bodyguard?”

“Yeah.”

“And you won’t be heading into any danger zones?”

“Of course not. Do you really think we’d put the prince in harm’s way?”

“Yeah, I figured! Then what had you so down in the dumps?”

“As if being away from you and Lettie wasn’t hard enough on its own, I’m stuck guarding that awful prince? Of course I’m torn up over it!”

Silence.

“Vi?”

“Quit whining and do your job.”

There was a smile on my face, but I could practically feel the blizzard raging behind me. I was starting to understand how Rohtas felt.

“I will, I will! It will be my pleasure, even!”

The moment he saw the look on my face, he got his act together. Good—he better have!

“Oh, that reminds me. The Bombshell Trio sent us another letter asking if they could come see Lettie. How many times does that make it now?”

“I can’t believe those girls... I won’t give them the answer they want to hear, so they go behind my back and ask *you*?”

“That’s what you get for always checking them at the door. If they want to meet her that badly, don’t you think it’s about time we let them? Lettie and I

are going about our lives normally at this point.”

The doctor had said that Lettie shouldn't see too many people right after she was born for fear of her catching ill, but that window of time had long since passed.

“Hmm...” Nevertheless, Mr. Fisalis gave a shake of his head.

“It's not just the trio. Miss Verbena and Miss Iris want to see her too.”

“...Fine. But it'll have to wait until I get home from my trip.”

“Why? There's nothing to keep the latter two from coming over while you're away.”

“That's not the issue.”

“Then what is it?”

“It wouldn't be fair for *them* to see her when *I* can't!”

That's *your problem?!*

“The mere thought of it makes my blood boil,” he went on.

Wow, petty much? And he'd said it with no small amount of chagrin, to boot. It was all I could do not to start laughing in disbelief over his ridiculous behavior.

I mean, that's classic Mr. Fisalis for you.

He must have noticed me giving him the stink eye, because he decided to talk to Violet instead. “Daddy's going to be gone for a while, Lettie. I'll miss you lots, but be a good little girl for Mommy. I promise to bring you back something nice,” he told her, pressing his forehead to hers.

Violet bopped him on the cheek with a teeny hand. “Ptoo!”

““Do your best, Daddy,’ is that it? I hear you, Lettie!”

“Ga!”

Pat. Pat.

Mr. Fisalis looked pleased as punch with the dubbing job he'd done. Hey, I was glad to see him back to his usual optimistic self, at least.

8. While Daddy's Away

"Ugh... I can't bring myself to leave. I'm telling you, seven days is too much to ask of me."

"What? Didn't you make up your mind to go? It's a little late to be having second thoughts now."

"Well, I take it ba—"

"I thought a man was supposed to be as good as his word."

"Ouch!"

It was the morning he was slated to leave for his business trip. I was *supposed* to be seeing him off at the entrance, but to no one's surprise, he'd started whining about how he didn't want to go.

Dealing with this each and every time really gets to be a pain in the butt... If he doesn't get his act together soon, I'm about ready to kick him out myself. I started to hike up my skirt, seriously considering making good on that ultimatum—but as it turned out, I didn't have to.

"I knew I'd find you complaining. Stop making trouble for your poor wife and let's get going."

Having predicted this turn of events, Corydalis had shown up to take him away by force.

"Corydalis!"

"If you don't mind, Madam, I'll be taking the vice captain from here!"

"You sadist!"

"Yeah, yeah, call me whatever you want, buddy," the knight replied, grabbing Mr. Fisalis by the scruff of his neck and dragging him away. There was one scary smile on his face.

"Sorry for the trouble," I apologized.

“Don’t be! It’s all part of the job.”

So he said as he mounted Mr. Fisalis on his horse and flashed me a dashing grin...but I was fairly confident this was *not* included in his job description. I was feeling worse for him by the second.

And so it was that my husband went on his merry (or not so much?) way.

*

Now that Mr. Fisalis was finally gone, it was time to change into my uniform and get some chores done...! *Not*. That wasn’t back on the table just yet.

In place of my usual housework, I was responsible for a new and much more indispensable task: looking after Violet.

“It’s a beautiful day, so why don’t we sit in the garden and enjoy the sun?”

“That’s a great idea, Madam. We’ll fetch you a quilt and a parasol, then.”

“Thanks.”

While Stellaria and the maids were getting us everything we’d need for a trip outside, Mimosa and I dressed our daughters for the occasion. Violet and Daisy had matching windbreakers—both sewn by yours truly, of course.

“When we put them in matching outfits, they look almost like a pair of sisters.”

“Why, I’m humbled, Madam!”

“Aww, it’s nothing to fuss about. Isn’t that right, Lettie? Daisy?”

Once we’d loaded them into their baby carriages, we were all set and ready to roll.

Since we had to be careful to keep Violet out of the bright rays of the sun, I laid her down in the shade of the parasol. Having long since learned to crawl, Daisy was busy dragging herself around the blanket. Every once in a while, she’d come close to wandering into the grass and Mimosa would pull her back...and rinse and repeat.

“What do you imagine Daddy’s up to right now, Lettie? It’s a shame we won’t see him around for a week... Not that you understand a word I’m saying, huh?”

“I doubt it.”

“I know it all goes over her head, but it’s hard to resist talking *at* her despite that.”

“I know the feeling!” Mimosa gave a few vigorous nods of her head. “But that is how babies learn to speak themselves, so really, you ought to keep at it!”

“Good point. Let’s be sure to talk lots and lots, Lettie! Are you curious where your daddy is? You see, he’s off on a fun little trip with this great boy we call His Highness!”

“I imagine Master Fisalis would have more than a few bones to pick with that description.”

Reassured, I’d gone back to running my mouth at Violet, but now I had Mimosa and the maids shaking with laughter. In fairness, they were right that I’d sugar-coated—or, well, completely *falsified* a few facts there.

“Do you think those two are getting along all right?”

“I imagine they’re still on the road. If nothing else, being out of each other’s hair means fewer chances to clash.”

“Let’s hope so. Oh, and speaking of His Highness...”

“Hm? What about him?” Mimosa asked, giving a curious tilt of her head.

Our casual conversation had brought a certain incident to mind.

“I just remembered that dream.”

“What dream?”

“The one Mr. Fisalis had not long before Lettie was born.”

“Oh! I do seem to recall the master raising a huge fuss over a nightmare he had.”

“Yeah. He dreamed the baby I was carrying was a girl, and once she grew older, she fell for the prince and insisted on becoming his future queen.”

“Yes, it’s all coming back to me now!”

If memory served, dream-Viola had raised a whip against him—uh, no, let’s

not get hung up on that part!—and it was that nightmare of his that had thrust me into the depths of maternity blues.

“It came true...”

“What did?”

“You know, the part where I had a girl. Since our child didn’t turn out to be a boy, doesn’t that make her marrying the prince, like...an actual possibility?” I replied, explaining the reason I’d frozen up all of a sudden.

Mimosa cast me an uncertain glance. “Oh, so *that’s* what has you all worried.”

“I got over my funk when everyone reassured me that the baby’s health was the important thing, and once she was born, it really did feel like her gender wasn’t that a big deal...but now the thought’s starting to bother me.”

When they noticed the look on my face getting gloomier and gloomier, the maids scrambled to cheer me up.

“Don’t get down on yourself, Madam! Come, let’s enjoy our tea. It’ll calm your nerves.”

“Nothing beats fatigue like a sweet treat. Here, try this chocolate!”

“Allow me to refill your cup!”

“Uh, thanks...”

I swear I was fine until a few seconds ago!

Repeating the word “prince” over and over had brought the successor dilemma back to the forefront of my mind. The problem still hadn’t been resolved—it was only postponed.

“What would you do if the same thing happened with Daisy?”

The question was so abrupt that Mimosa wasn’t sure how to respond. “If Daisy went the same route as dream-Lettie, you mean?”

“Yeah. If she came to you out of nowhere and said she wanted to go marry a bigwig.”

“A bigwig, hm? Well, let me think...”

Humming to herself, Mimosa fell deep into thought. To be fair, she'd probably never considered the scenario before. Neither had I! As a matter of fact, until Mr. Fisalis had offered me the contract—I mean, proposed(?) to me, I'd figured I was going to spend the rest of my life single.

"I'd be against it, to be sure, but I think the bigger concern is what Bellis would say."

"Good point. Bellis wouldn't be happy."

Wow... To think there existed an even bigger obstacle than Mr. Fisalis!

"I can already picture him saying, 'If you want to get married, you'd better find a man who can best me.' And that'd be *before* social status comes into the picture," I said, envisioning the invisible blizzard blowing behind him.

"Yeah! You're so right!" every single one of the maids shouted amid a fit of laughter, likely picturing the same exact scene.

"Between Cercis and Bellis, who do you think would pose the bigger hurdle?"

"Bellis!" came the unanimous reply.

"So I'm not the only one, huh?"

We erupted into a fresh wave of laughter.

The little girl in question gave us a blank stare, confused as to what had the grown-ups laughing so hard. *It has to do with you, Daisy, but of course you're too young to get it!*

"Master Fisalis loves to spoil Miss Lettie, so I imagine he'd let her have anything she wanted if she asked him nicely enough."

"Bellis treats Daisy like a princess too...but something tells me that's all the more reason he'll be picky about her husband."

"Exactly!"

"My, but consider how deeply the master cares for Miss Lettie! Perhaps he'll find the motivation to harden his heart and tell her no...or perhaps not?"

"Yeah, I doubt it."

"Same!" the maids chimed in.

Mr. Fisalis! The verdict is that you need to learn how to be stricter with Violet!

“At least Daisy only has Bellis to worry about. I imagine there will be a lot more obstacles in Miss Lettie’s path,” said Mimosa, wiping the tears of mirth from her eyes.

“You think?”

“Absolutely. First of all, any prospective partner will have to get through Rohtas’s screening process.”

“Yikes, good point.”

“And in the meantime, he’ll have to put up with all the gossip from your advocates in high society and the chivalric order.”

“That sounds like the worst part...”

“And once he’s overcome *those* hurdles, he’ll still have Master Fisalis to contend with.”

“Three whole barriers, huh? Sounds like he’s in for a rough ride.”

“Indeed. I imagine he’ll be a broken man by the time he even makes it to Miss Lettie.”

“Do you think there’s a guy out there brave enough to conquer every single one of those obstacles? By the time we manage to find him, Lettie might be an old spinster.”

She’d only just been born, but already I was worried for my daughter’s future—and it was mostly Mr. Fisalis’s fault.

◆ ◆ ◆ Idle Aside: Meanwhile, with Cercis ◆ ◆ ◆

The quiet country road wound on and on. To either side were fields that boasted a wide variety of crops. The point of this inspection was to observe with our own two eyes what was being grown and how. But I had to wonder—why, pray tell, couldn't we have done this from an office back in Rohze?

We were conducting this inspection on foot in order to take a closer look at the goods. Corydalis and I were trudging along at the back of the procession. Seeing as we had to follow after the prince, we were moving at a snail's pace.

"I want this trip to hurry up and end."

"Huh? Are you crazy? We only started the inspection two days ago."

"Do we really need to spend a whole week on this? Why, we could've done it in a day."

"Like hell we could've! His Highness is just a kid."

"And what benefit is there to having that *kid* spend a week inspecting anything? It's a good idea to teach him how to run the kingdom from a young age, sure, but he's *too* young."

"You know, it *sounds* like you're concerned about him, but I've known you long enough to tell that you only care about getting home as soon as possible."

"I'm not hiding it."

I'd been ordered to accompany Prince Dianthus as a bodyguard on his on-site inspections, but to be perfectly honest, I didn't want to be here. All I ever did on this trip was follow the prince around as he looked things over, complaining to Corydalis all the while. My subordinates had already scouted out the areas His Highness was supposed to go, so there was very little to be concerned about. Was there really any point to me sticking around?

"We need someone to hand out orders if things go south."

"Get out of my head."

Corydalis knew what I was thinking like the back of his hand. We'd known each other a little too long for comfort.

"And the worst of it all is that I'm banned from sending any letters."

"What can you do? That one was a direct request from your wife."

"Tell me—why would Viola request something like that?!"

"She learned from the last time."

"Hrk...!"

Well, there was nothing I could say to *that*.

The last time I'd gone on an extended business trip, I'd been worried she might be lonely...okay, no, I'd been worried she might *forget* about me, which had driven me to write her letter after letter. The inspector had later come crying to me that looking those over had been "a trial (on the emotional front)."

"That considerate wife of yours is just trying to make less work for us and the mail inspectors. You could learn a thing or two from her."

"Now see what's happened?! I'm running low on Viola fuel! And to make matters worse, this time I have my beloved daughter to think about. Seven days is too long to be away!"

"Hey, at least there's only five to go."

"Oh, how I want to write her a letter! No—I want to *get* one."

"Seriously? Lettie's too young to write to you."

"Anything would do, so long as I know how she's doing."

"Maybe you should've had her make a handprint on a sheet of paper!"

"That's a great idea! Why didn't you say that *before* we headed out?!"

"You were too busy whining."

"If you'd given me *that* idea, I would've left without a fight."

"Uh-huh. I *totally* believe that."

He's right! If only I had her handprint—no, maybe a portrait of her to look at, I'd at least have something to keep me company in the lonely hours! Now who

should I ask to paint her? Perhaps I'll have Rohtas seek out the most famous artist around. As soon as I get home...no, I could even write him a letter right now and... Wait, I was banned from doing just that.

Corydalis's little suggestion had given me my second wind.

"When I get home, I'll have her make a handprint—no, I'll have someone else draw her portrait!"

"How did you end up at that?!"

"Now that we've got *that* settled, let's get this job over with!"

"Uh, Cercis? We're working on a set schedule, so there's not a lot we can do to speed it up."

"We can make sure it doesn't drag on *longer* than it needs to. Anything to get home a minute or even a second sooner!"

"You go all out over the dumbest things, man..."

Corydalis could sigh and roll his eyes all he wanted; I couldn't have cared less. I was going to do whatever it took to get home as soon as physically possible.

9. Lettie and the Knights of the Order

Just like I told Mr. Fisalis before he left, the week went by in the blink of an eye. Nothing of interest happened on my end, and I spent the time lounging around with Violet and the servants. Since I received no emergency correspondence from my husband (it seemed my letter ban was actually being enforced), I assumed his mission had gone off without a hitch.

In light of how heartbroken he'd been when he left, I spent the day he was due back getting everything ready for his return. Whatever it took to take the edge off his fatigue!

"Check the bedding!"

"Yes, ma'am!" the maids sounded off.

"Everything's clean and fluffed!"

"Perfect!"

And then...

"Do you think we can make Mr. Fisalis's favorite—?"

"Worry not, *Madame*. I'm ready for any order!"

"You're the best, Cartham!"

I made sure that all of his daily necessities—his bedding and a change of clothes, for example—were laid out and fluffed for maximum comfort, and that he'd have all his favorite foods lined up on the table. Once upon a time, I might have been scurrying around with the rest of the servants, but today I wasn't allowed to lift a finger. "You and Miss Lettie ought to sit back and watch, Madam," they'd said. But I gotta say—handing out orders from the sidelines was nowhere near as rewarding!

*

Once the preparations were in place, all that remained was to wait for the man of the hour to arrive. With nothing left to do, I decided to take a late

afternoon tea break.

That was when the usual herald showed up to announce my husband's return.

"Vice Captain Fisalis has successfully concluded his mission and is on his way home. He left the royal palace not long ago, so I believe he should be arriving here shortly."

Thank goodness he finished the job safely...or so I'd like to say, but the mission's not really over until he makes it home!

If he'd just left the palace, that meant he'd get to the mansion sometime before dinner.

"Daddy's almost home, Lettie! We'd better get ready to give him a warm welcome!"

Okie-dokie! I'd better put on the finishing touches before he arrives.

"He's going to get home exhausted, I bet. Jumping straight into dinner might be rough for him, so let's start things off with a spot of tea. Though knowing Cercis, he might prefer a stiff drink. What do you think, Rohtas?"

"However you like it, Madam. We're happy to accommodate your every request."

"In that case, go ahead and prepare us some tea, booze, and a light snack."

"Yes, ma'am."

With a quick bow, Rohtas left to get what we needed from the kitchen.

"His room should be good to go. I was there when we were getting it ready... Oh, but do you think he might want a bath before his tea?"

This time, Dahlia was the one to nod. "No need to worry. The bath is ready for him whenever he wants it."

"Nothing left to do but wait for his return, then!"

Good things come to those who wait? Something tells me I'm not using that phrase quite right.

“Is he here yet? ...How about now?”

After finishing all the preparations, I did a whole lot of pacing and fidgeting. Cradling Violet in my arms, I walked up and down the entrance hall. I was too restless to sit still.

Since it was about time for his master to arrive, Rohtas had popped into the hall himself. “He should be here shortly. Oh, what’s that commotion I hear?”

The butler checked what was going on outside. Sure enough, I too could hear animated voices drawing closer from the other side of the door.

“That’s quite the racket. Today’s escort must be quite the chatterbox.”

“Quite.”

Huh, his homecomings aren’t usually this noisy, I thought, cocking my head to one side. Rohtas regarded that with a sardonic smile.

Right as I heard the voices growing louder, the front door opened and in came Mr. Fisalis.

“Cercis!”

He broke into a smile when he saw us...but that didn’t last for long. “I’m ho—”

“Hey, Madam Fisalis! It’s been ages!”

“Look, we brought you your husband safe and sound!”

“Omigosh, is this Violet?! She’s sooo cute!”

“I’ve been dying to meet her!”

A stampede of footsteps rang out, followed by a herd of people pouring into the room and pushing their way past my husband. Yep, you guessed it—the source of all the noise had been none other than Mr. Fisalis’s subordinates.

Drowning out whatever Mr. Fisalis had to say, the knights made it to me before he did and had me surrounded in an instant.

Wow, now this brings back memories! I don’t mind if you guys flock to me, but ease up a little, okay? I’ve got Violet to worry about today!

“Hello, everyone! It’s good to see you,” I greeted them.

“It’s been too long! We wanted to swing by sooner, but the vice captain wouldn’t let us!”

“That’s why we had to force our way in today!”

“What she said.”

Mr. Fisalis’s bearing stood in stark contrast to the ladies’ exuberant laughter. Given the boot by his subordinates, he was standing outside our little circle...and the look on his face was the stuff of nightmares!

Yikes, Mr. Fisalis—you look like you’re about to burst a blood vessel over there! It wouldn’t kill you to have a little patience!

“Welcome home, Mr. Fisalis!” I shouted from amid the ring of knights, but it was already too late.

“Hi, Vi, Lettie... I’m home.”

Mr. Fisalis was glaring daggers at his band of subordinates. *Oh dear... Looks like he’s in a sulk.*

*

Faced with an impromptu visit from the knights, the servants and I surreptitiously transitioned into the Guest Shift.

“Bring out more tea and drinks ASAP! Go heavy on the booze in particular, or else we’ll run out!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Tell Cartham to put enough dinner on the table for everyone! If there’s not enough servings to go around, we’ll just have to go smorgasbord-style! It’ll be okay—I know he can figure something out!”

“Got it!”

“Send half of the maids to wait on the visitors, while the other half will work on setting the table!”

“Understood.”

For the time being, I had crammed—*ahem*, showed our guests to the parlor before slipping out to the corridor to fire off order after order. Speed was of the essence here.

I'd covered the most important instructions. Now it was time to leave the rest to Dahlia and Rohtas and go entertain our guests in the parlor.

The lady knights nearly flew out of their seats when Violet and I came into the room. "We've been dying to see you, Lettie!"

"After all those letters you wrote me, I'm sorry I never managed to give you guys the go-ahead."

"Don't sweat it, Madam! It was all the vice captain's fault."

"Totally! Besides, we're getting to see her now, so what's it matter?"

"I've been waiting so long for this moment!"

"Her cheeks are so squishy! And look at these teeny little hands!"

"Hmm, do you think she's got more of her mom or her dad in her? It's hard to tell when she's still all chubby."

The ladies squealed with delight at every squirm and wiggle from Lettie.

"She got her hair and eyes from Mr. Fisalis. As for the rest of her features...well, it's hard to say. She reminds me a lot of my sister when she was little."

"Huh, interesting. Say, Madam, is it okay if I hold her?"

"Of course!"

The moment I was about to hand Lettie over to Angelica, Chamomile came to an abrupt realization and stopped her friend in her tracks. "Hold on a second, Angelica! You've been wearing that filthy jacket all day! What if you contaminate Lettie?!"

Uh, I think that's a little too paranoid...but it's nice that they're being so careful.

"We should go wash our hands!"

"Here, I'll take off my jacket! It should be fine now."

“We wouldn’t want anything to happen to Lettie.”

“May I use your wash—?”

Just as Angelica was about to ask where our wash basin was, one of the maids came in with a towel and a tub full of soapy water. “Feel free to use this.”

“Now that’s what I call service!” the trio crowed.

Impressed by our maids’ work ethic, the ladies washed their hands clean, stripped themselves of their uniform jackets, and—now that they were all good to go—cradled Violet in their arms.

“Wow, she hardly weighs anything!”

“Lucky! I’m next!”

The room rang with their gleeful laughter. Beside us, the male knights had started clamoring for a turn of their own.

“Hey, I want a turn holding Lettie!”

“Look, we made sure to wash up too!”

Alas, Mr. Fisalis shot each and every one of them down. “No boys allowed!”

“No fair!”

Though I felt sorry for his crestfallen subordinates, I couldn’t help laughing at their expense.

I see Mr. Fisalis is already swatting the flies away. If he’s this territorial when she’s only a baby, I can only imagine how bad he’s going to get after she grows up... He’s going to pose a huge obstacle, all right.

*

While the kitchen staff was preparing an extra helping of dinner, the ladies and I were sipping our tea and drinks in the parlor, having ourselves a little girls-only party with Violet as the guest of honor.

“The vice captain put a lot of thought into picking out a souvenir, by the way.”

“Oh, did he?” I responded.

“There were quite a few things you can’t find here in Rohze, so it was tough

choice for him!”

“Aww. If there were that many unusual sights, I wish I could have seen them myself.”

“I hope you don’t mind that we gave him a bit of advice!”

“He ended up going with a little something for you and Lettie.”

“Oh boy! I can’t wait to see what it is!”

And meanwhile, with the guys...

“When Lettie grows up, can I put my name in the hat to be your future son-in-law?”

“Hey, no fair! I want a chance too!”

“I’m my family’s second son, so I’m good to join the Fisalis household whenever!”

“You think I’d give my darling daughter to a single one of you sleazy scoundrels?! Besides, by the time she’s old enough to marry, you’ll be nothing but a bunch of geezers!”

“Geezers?” the knights protested. “Now that’s just mean!”

But enough of my husband and his knights’ playful banter.

Cartham had managed to pull a meal together, and so we all moved to the dining room. Owing to the large number of guests at our table, it turned out to be quite the lively dinner. Most days our dining table felt unnecessarily huge, but at times like this, I was truly glad for the extra space.

In the end, the knights did so much eating and drinking that we invited them to stay the night.

*

After I’d made sure someone had shown Mr. Fisalis’s subordinates to their guest lodgings, my husband and I finally retired to our own room.

All this when poor Mr. Fisalis was so tired. I sure kept him waiting a while, huh?

“I can’t believe those jerks! They *claimed* they were only going to walk me home—how did that turn into them spending the night?!”

“Oh, it’s not *all* bad! At least they’ll get off your case about meeting Lettie now. Aren’t you glad?”

“And what if *I* want to get on *their* case? Good grief. Here I took the time to bring you back a souvenir, and I didn’t even have the chance to show it to you.”

“Oh, Chamomile mentioned that. What did you buy us?”

“Some fabric woven with specialty thread. This one’s for you, and this one is for Lettie,” he said, showing me two pieces of cloth decorated with an exotic pattern, the kind you’d never see in Rohze. Mine was a burgundy color, while Violet’s was a light pink. Upon taking a closer look, I could tell that these textiles and their geometric, floral patterns were intricately woven, smooth to the touch, and undoubtedly expensive. With how soft and fluffy they were, I figured they’d make for good scarves.

“What gorgeous fabric! I can’t believe how soft it feels!”

“That’s what the shop owner said: it’s silky enough to be gentle on a baby’s skin. I figure we can have Madame Fleur come and tailor it into something tomorrow.”

“No need—I’m sure she’s a busy lady! I’m more than happy to sew Lettie’s clothing myself!”

“Oh, right... Now that you mention it, you *are* an expert seamstress, aren’t you? Sounds like a plan, then.”

“Yeah!”

I’ve got nothing but time on my hands, so I can sew to my heart’s content!

All that aside, what mattered most was that Mr. Fisalis had made it home safe from his trip.

10. Rainy Day Mazes

All day long it had been cold and rainy outside. Just as I was gazing out the window into the gloomy sky, debating what to do while I was stuck indoors, Rohtas came up to me.

Uh-oh... Please don't tell me he's about to spring a rainy day lesson on me!

"Why don't we try our hand at some mazes today?"

"Come again?" His proposition had taken the wind out of my sails. "Huh? Why? Because it's raining outside?"

"Yes, Madam. Or would you prefer the usual dance lesson?"

"Nope! No thanks! I'm good!"

My rainy day lessons had been on hold ever since I'd gotten pregnant with Violet. Even now that she'd been born, I had my hands full looking after her; I hadn't had any time to waste on etiquette classes. Now that Violet was over six months old and big enough to sit upright, however, I finally had a little room to breathe. Rohtas must have noticed as much.

"Why mazes, though?" I asked.

"Well, wouldn't it be fun to broaden your horizons?"

"Sure!"

Up until now, all my rainy day lessons had involved something "useful" in one way or another (whether it be dancing or self-defense), so no doubt there was some hidden significance to these mazes too.

Not to mention it sounds like fun! It'd be silly to let this opportunity pass me by.

"I have a handful of challenging mazes right here. Your goal is to solve each of them within the time limit."

"What about Lettie?"

I cast a glance Violet's way, only to find Mimosa busy playing with her and Daisy. That was bound to keep my hands free for a while.

"Okay, let's do it!" I decided.

Without further ado, I jumped into this unconventional new activity.

*

"This symbol denotes that an opening is only accessible from the inside. This one means the opposite—that you can only get through from the outside."

"Hmm..."

The maze was drawn on a huge scroll of paper. We'd unfurled it over the parlor table, and Rohtas was now in the midst of explaining the rules.

This puzzle consisted of three main stages(?), each of which was connected to the next via several paths. Though there were multiple starting points and goals to each section, everything in one section counted as part of a single stage. *Seems a little unbalanced, if you ask me. Oh well—no point in thinking too hard about it, I guess!*

"There's a lot of different exits and entrances, I see. And some of them are one way only."

"Heh heh. Delightfully peculiar, isn't it?"

"You said it!"

The maze contained openings that could only be accessed from the outside, as well as some that could only be accessed from the inside. Rohtas was right—this certainly was a peculiar puzzle. It was a lot more challenging than your usual maze and its clear-cut rules, which made it even more exciting to tackle.

"Your first task is to make it from this starting point to this goal. Ready...begin!" Rohtas shouted, turning over an hourglass as he did.

"All right!"

There were some large open areas (rooms?) as well as some smaller ones; winding between them were all sorts of paths ranging from thick to thin. A closer look revealed a pattern to the sizes of the rooms and passages, but I

didn't have a moment to spare scrutinizing it. My primary objective was to find a way out before time was up.

"If I take this path, then go this way... Yes, I did it! Well, Rohtas? Did you see that?"

I looked back at Rohtas with a triumphant grin, and he checked the hourglass with a smile. "That was pretty quick."

"You bet it was!"

I solved it with half the sand left in the hourglass! That was a piece of cake.

"I see the warm-up was too easy for you. Ready to take a stab at the next route?"

"Yeah!"

"This time, I want you to start from here and find your way to this exit," he said, pointing to another entrance and end point. It was the same maze I'd just done, but now the challenge was to find a different way through it. I had a feeling this route was going to be much longer and more complicated than the last one. *Heh heh! Now I'm really getting into this!*

"Ready...go!"

"Okay!"

My fingers flew over the maze the moment Rohtas gave the signal. "Uhh... Let me go through here and—wait, that's a dead end. This way, maybe...? Shoot, I can only get through there from the inside!"

Things weren't going quite as smoothly this time, and I had to start over from square one again and again.

While I'm dragging my feet, the sand keeps trickling away! Hurry, Viola, hurry! The route I just tried to take isn't going to work, since it opens from the wrong side... Oh, here's a path I haven't tried yet! I have a good feeling about this one.

"Done!"

"And that's time!"

I reached the goal nearly the exact moment that Rohtas announced my time

was up.

“Did I make it?”

“I’ll be generous and let you have that one.”

“Woohoo!”

“The next one’s going to be even trickier.”

“Bring it on! I’m starting to get the hang of this.”

I tackled the same maze again and again, switching up the starting and end points each time. Having done the puzzle so many times now, I’d begun to memorize which way the openings went (whether they were accessible from the inside or outside, in other words), so it was taking me less and less time to get to the end, even as the routes themselves were getting longer and longer.

“Man, I know this maze inside and out by now.”

I lifted the scroll off the table and studied it from top to bottom. My goal was to get to the point where I was seeing it on the back of my eyelids, like some kind of afterimage.

“Is that so? You must have a good memory, Madam.”

“Heh heh heh!”

For whatever reason, Rohtas was beaming with satisfaction.

This has been fun and all, but what’s the point of all this? I still don’t get Rohtas’s game here. Knowing him, he’d never do something without a reason. Still... I am enjoying myself, so I shouldn’t overthink it. You never know—it might come in handy one day. Plus, I got Rohtas to compliment me on my memory!

Rohtas cleared the diagram off the table.

“Are we done?”

“No. I have another maze for you.”

“There’s more? Nice! Lay it on me!”

Now that I’d mastered every start-and-end combo in the first maze, it was time to bring out the next one. I could hardly wait!



I took the next puzzle Rohtas handed to me and laid it out over the table. It was yet another maze with three main stages.

“Each stage on the last one was rectangular, but these are all shaped like a backwards ‘C.’”

“Indeed, Madam.”

Before I got started, I checked to see if the “open-in” and “open-out” restrictions were still in place. “Are the rules the same as last time?”

“Yes, ma’am. The same rules apply, so pay close attention to which doors open inward and which open out.”

“Got it!” Thanks to the previous maze, I had the symbols down pat now.

“Let’s start with an easy one. I want you to start from here and come out through there.”

“Okie-dokie!”

“Ready...go!”

As soon as Rohtas turned the hourglass over, my eyes and fingers began to race across the page.

*

I tried my hand at the second maze just as many times as I had the first one, changing up the route on each go. Once again, I had totally committed the maze (or map?) to memory!

“I can still see that second maze every time I close my eyes... What am I going to do if I start dreaming about it?”

It was only after Dahlia suggested I break for lunch that I learned what time it was. I’d spent the entire morning solving puzzles! If my eyes had been glued to the paper for *that* long, it was no wonder the second maze was stuck in my head.

It was just a maze, but this clearly wasn’t *just* a maze. Rohtas was definitely up to something.

“I daresay it’s a good thing to know that sketch like the back of your hand,” he

said.

“What? Why?”

Something about the way Rohtas had phrased that was bugging me. I shot him a blank look, but he only responded with a mysterious smile.

What, is there some benefit to memorizing that puzzle?

“You still haven’t realized?”

“Huh?”

I have no idea what I’m supposed to be realizing here, I thought, cocking my head to one side.

When he saw I wasn’t getting it, Rohtas tapped a spot on the second maze, still spread over the table, and said, “Here’s a hint: consider the shape of the second maze and the positioning of its biggest enclosure.”

“Its shape? The biggest enclosure?”

As I said before, the maze was made up of empty spaces both small and large, strung together by doors and passages of varying sizes.

“I mean, it’s shaped like a backwards ‘C.’ And the enclosure’s...positioning...hmmm? Huh? What are you getting at? I dunno. I’m stumped!”

“Come now, don’t give up—take a closer look.” Just as I was ready to snap and yell, *What am I supposed to be looking at? It’s just a dumb maze!*, Rohtas gave me yet another hint. “The layout should be very familiar to you.”

The layout should be familiar?

“It’s a backwards ‘C,’ and there’s a big path right down the middle...leading to a huge room...hrm?”

Something with a suspiciously similar structure was floating around in the back of my mind.

“The room has a door that leads to the outside, as well as one that goes to the adjacent room. That big room next-door doesn’t have a way to get outside, but it *does* connect to a wide passageway...”

The parlor has a door that leads to the neighboring dining room. There's a door from the parlor to the garden, but there's no way to get to the garden from the dining room!

Once one piece fell into place, the rest of the rooms and passages started to take shape in my head.

This is totally a blueprint of the Fisalis manor!

"Rohtas! Is this a blueprint—?"

"So you finally figured it out."

"So I'm right? We've been living in a maze this whole time?!"

Our very own mansion is one of those "labyrinths" you always see in adventure novels!

I looked up at Rohtas with stars in my eyes. His smile turning into a withering one, he replied, "Well, not quite."

*

Now that I'd taken the time to examine the maze more carefully, I found that it was indeed the spitting image of our mansion.

"Jeez... I can't believe I was staring at it for so long and I never even noticed."

"It's because you approached it as a puzzle. If you'd started from the assumption that it was a blueprint, I'm sure you would have seen it differently."

He had a point—I hadn't gone in expecting this diagram to be anything but a maze. *But honestly, the backwards "C" shape ought to have been enough to tip me off...*

My first instinct as I stared down at the drawing was to roast myself, but there *was* something off about it—enough to keep me from realizing what it was at a first glance. *Do we have these narrow little passageways? And what's this mini-sized room over here supposed to be?* Stuff like that.

I'd cleaned and run(!) my way through every nook and cranny of the manor; I ought to have known the place inside and out. Why, I was confident I knew the lay of the land even better than Mr. Fisalis himself!

“I guess so. But still...”

“What is it, Madam?”

“It looks like there are some corridors and rooms I’ve never seen. Like that one, or this one here. That’s probably why I didn’t recognize it.”

When I pointed to a couple spots on the map, Rohtas broke into a grin. The look on his face screamed, *You’ve hit the nail on the head*. “I’m glad you noticed. Those are our hidden passages and secret chamber, respectively.”

Hidden passages and secret chamber? Was that the whole point of this lesson?

“What hidden passages? We have a secret chamber?!” I sounded two steps away from hysterical—that’s how shocked I was to learn this outrageous secret.

“Yes, ma’am. The chamber is where you, Master Fisalis—and depending on the situation, the rest of us—are to hide during an emergency. Alternatively, you can use our hidden passages to escape the manor.”

“I don’t wanna imagine what kind of emergency would call for all that... Oh, wait! You guys must have used a hidden passage that one time!”

“Precisely.”

A while back, a band of thieves had broken into the Fisalis manor. During the incident, Rohtas must have used this hidden passage to move around behind the scenes!

Now I see! This must be the secret he alluded to at the time.

“I’m glad we had it back then, but I hope we won’t have to use it ever again. I wish I could erase its existence from my memory, but I know I shouldn’t... It’s a real dilemma.”

The last thing I wanted was a repeat of that situation. Peace be on earth!

Reminded of that absolute nightmare of an event, I furrowed my brow, but good old Rohtas stepped in to lift the mood. “Now that you know all the ins and outs of this manor, you’re truly living up to your title as a duchess.”

“Oh?”

All of a sudden, I was feeling a whole lot better about this new discovery. Talk about easy, Viola!

“It’d be a good idea for you to see these hidden areas in person at some point, however.”

“Good thinking!”

Here I thought I’d known everything there was to know about this place, but that had been naive of me. The Fisalis manor held all sorts of secrets!

While I was caught up in my weird little moment, I heard the sound of something tearing.

“What are you ripping up?”

“The blueprint.”

“What?!”

And indeed, it seemed Rohtas had ripped up the blueprint to our mansion so that not a trace of it remained. The smile on his face was enough to give me the heebie-jeebies.

Once he’d gathered up all the scraps of paper, he dumped them right into the unlit fireplace and set it ablaze.

“The blueprint to our manor ought to be kept in memory alone. That’s the only way to ensure it never leaves the premises.”

“Uh-huh...”

So that’s how they’ve guarded the Fisalis manor’s secrets so well!

* Bonus Scene *

“By the way, what was the first maze?”

“The royal palace.”

“What?”

“The royal palace.”

“...You’re not going to rip up and burn that one?”

“No need. We keep it under tight lock and key.”

“Huh?! We’re allowed to keep a copy?!”

“Whatever are you referring to?”

“The royal palace bluepri—”

“Hm?”

“Oh. Gotcha.”

I’m not supposed to comment.

11. A No-Holds-Barred Game of Tag!

“Who could have guessed that Rohtas would turn the floor plans of the royal palace into a puzzle?”

“No one, I’m sure.”

“Right?!”

I was telling Mr. Fisalis all about how I’d spent the afternoon solving mazes, only for Rohtas to drop the bomb that they’d been the floor plans for the manor and the royal palace all along. I mean, using the super-duper top secret palace blueprint for a *game*? The Fisalis servants were something else!

“He just, like, handed me this sheet of paper! At a glance, it looked like your regular maze—just a bunch of boxes (or rooms, I guess) and the paths connecting them. I’d never really visualized the palace as anything but a three-dimensional space, so I didn’t make the connection.”

“That’s a fair point. A 2D model can give a completely different impression from the 3D version.”

“Exactly!”

Even the manor, which I’d been so sure I knew inside and out, had been unrecognizable in blueprint form. There was no chance I’d identify the royal palace, where I was only familiar with a few select areas.

“So how’d it go? Did you memorize the layout of the royal palace?”

“You better believe I did! I know its every nook and cranny, from the corridors down to the hidden passages!”

After how many puzzles I’d done with the map, it was only natural.

I threw out my non-existent chest, beaming with pride, only for Mr. Fisalis to turn around and compliment his butler. “Perfect. Nice work, Rohtas.”

“Thank you, Master Fisalis.”

“Wait...don’t tell me this whole game was *your* idea, Cercis?”

“No, I had nothing to do with it. Rohtas came up with the idea on his own.”

“I thought it might come in handy down the line.”

“And I must say I approve.”

“I’m honored to hear that.”

Now I see—it was all another part of Rohtas’s etiquette curriculum. That’s about what I expected.

“Now that you know the floor plan forwards and backwards, I can rest easy no matter *what* happens at the royal palace,” said Mr. Fisalis.

“Things don’t tend to *happen* at—hold on a second, Cercis! That was a pretty traumatic experience for me, I’ll have you know!”

“Sorry!” he rushed to apologize. And darn right he should’ve—I never wanted to play another game of tag in the royal palace again!

“Don’t remind me of that!”

“Look, I said I was sorry! Still, there’s no telling when you might get caught in some emergency situation there, right?”

“I guess you have a point. But memorizing the blueprint doesn’t mean I’ll know what to do when I’m there in person.”

2D and 3D were two different kettles of fish. I could find my way around a map, sure, but all the new factors in play when you were actually there (like the walls, pillars, etc.) were bound to throw me for a loop. Not to mention that the hidden doors were camouflaged so as not to be immediately apparent.

I envisioned the scenario with a groan.

“Don’t think about it too hard,” said Mr. Fisalis, all matter-of-fact. “Just picture the map in your head and move based on that information.”

He makes it sound so simple... Well, I guess that sort of thing is a part of his job.

“That’s easy for you to say—you’ve got actual training! *I’ve* never done anything like that before! Don’t assume we’re operating on the same level

here.”

“It’s really not that hard... Here, for example: you’ve never gotten lost downtown, have you?”

“Of course not.”

I know my way around! I thought. Not that it was anything worth bragging about, really.

“What do you do when you go somewhere new?”

“I check the route on a map before I leave, and I don’t head out until I have a good idea of where I need to go. Once I’m there, I find my way around using buildings as landmarks.”

“It’s exactly like that. First you memorize the directions, right? And from there, you just have to recall the most distinctive features along the way.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Explained in those terms, it was easy to visualize. *Wow, is that really all there is to it?*

“See? Anyway, here’s an idea: why not come take a look around *our* manor sometime so you can see for yourself?”

“Around the hidden passage and secret chamber, you mean? Am I allowed to see them?”

“Of course.”

“Yay! I can’t wait to see what they look like. Is it all dark and damp down there? Oh man, what if I find the skull of a servant who wandered down there and never found their way out?!”

“We don’t live in an adventure novel.”

“Oops. I was so excited that my imagination got away from me there.”

I’m going to explore the manor’s uncharted territory! Now I’m getting pumped. By the way, any chance I can see the hidden passages of the royal palace too?

It was one of Mr. Fisalis's days off, sometime after I'd dabbled in the world of mazes. Normally he'd suggest the two of us go somewhere together, but unfortunately, he had such a huge backlog of paperwork that Rohtas had given him strict orders not to leave the house.

"Daddy's got a lot of work to do, huh, Lettie?"

"Ptoo..."

"Let's hope he finishes up soon."

"Ga!"

"If he tries to blow it off, Rohtas'll have his head."

"Hee hee!"

"Ooh... She got a kick out of that one."

While waiting for Mr. Fisalis to finish up his work, I was playing with Violet on the sofa in his study.

"I don't mind if you two go for a walk while I'm busy," he suggested, sounding so defeated he toed the line between pitiful and hilarious. I had to stop myself from giggling.

"It's fine. Lettie wants you to come with us!"

"She does?"

"Yep. So we'll wait until you're done."

"I'll finish up on the double."

Leveraging Violet was all it took to give Mr. Fisalis a kick in the pants these days. Unfortunately, he had an extra heavy workload on his hands today, so it wasn't until after lunch—but still a little too early for afternoon tea—that he had completed the majority of it. Violet had grown fussy, bored of waiting around, so I had handed her off to Mimosa to go play with Daisy some time ago.

"I've taken care of what I needed to, but now it's an awkward time of day. Too bad."

"Yeah, you're right."

Mr. Fisalis and I were working together to sort the documents he'd just read and signed. It'd make things easier on Rohtas when he came to pick them up.

"It's too late to go anywhere now, but I can't say I'm in the mood for an early tea break."

"Yeah..."

"And Lettie's already asleep. So much for our walk."

"She and Daisy were playing pretty hard."

Tuckered out from all that fun, Violet was currently taking an afternoon nap with her friend.

Mr. Fisalis stood up and did a full-body stretch. "Man... I'm feeling stiff as a board after all those hours spent battling paperwork. I'm in the mood for some sword practice. Or maybe I'll go running."

Sword practice made sense, but "running"? What?

"Running where, exactly?"

"I don't know—anywhere. The garden, perhaps?"

"That'll get you in trouble with Bellis."

"Good point."

Going for a stroll was one thing, but racing through our beautifully manicured lawn was bound to wreck all his hard work. *Though, uh...didn't you sprint through it once before, Mr. Fisalis?*

"Around the mansion, then?"

"That'll get you in trouble with everyone else."

"But aren't *you* always running down the halls?"

"Not by choice! It's a part of my training."

Back before I got pregnant, in addition to my drills in swordsmanship and martial arts, I'd been forced to run around dressed to the nines as a part of my rainy day lessons(?). Yeah...that sure was a thing that happened.

"Then how about we play some tag? You know, as another part of your

training.”

“The word ‘then’ is doing a lot of work in that sentence! Tag? Seriously?”

“Yeah. An all-out game of tag between me and you. Didn’t you say you wanted to see the secret chamber and such?”

“I did. So?”

“It’ll be a good opportunity for you to do some exploring.”

“What, *now*?! I thought you were going to show me around normally!”

“I wouldn’t mind doing things that way, but isn’t it more fun to make it into a game?”

“Okay, fair point!”

Adding a game into the mix would make it more exciting... Uh, hold on. I already learned through mazes just the other day! Does everyone think I’m an overgrown kid or what?!

Eh, oh well. Mr. Fisalis looks really into the idea; it couldn’t hurt to indulge him.

“Great, then it’s settled. I’ll be ‘it.’ We’ll play until tea time, and whoever loses has to obey one order from the winner. How’s that sound?” he proposed, a huge grin spread across his face. I was getting an awfully bad feeling about what would happen if I lost.

“Fine by me. No part of the manor is considered off-limits, right?”

“Of course not. Feel free to head behind the scenes or stay in plain sight. The only thing you’re *not* allowed to do is find a hiding place and run out the clock. The point of the game is to *outrun* me.”

“Why? Because staying in one place means I wouldn’t be familiarizing myself with the secret passage?”

“Exactly.”

“Hmm... That *does* sound fun.”

“Doesn’t it?”

This was all set to be a good example of learning-by-doing.

Ha! Now that I've learned about the secret chamber (and passage), I know everything there is to know about our mansion!

"You're on!"

"Let's get started, then. I'll give you to the count of ten. One, two..."

"Already?! C'mon!"

Seeing as Mr. Fisalis had already begun his countdown, I rushed out of the study as fast as I could.

*

Since I was dressed in my casual wear that day, my shoes were low-heeled and easy to move in. My footwear wasn't an issue—the problem was how *long* I was going to be running. Tea time wasn't too far off, but spending the entire time on my feet was going to take a lot of stamina.

Considering how long it had been since my last rainy day lesson, my physical capabilities weren't what they used to be. I hadn't even realized what wonders those dance lessons were doing for my strength and endurance, or those hallway sprints for my agility. All that time I'd spent slacking off had left me rusty.

I'd have to use my head to get out of this one.

My best bet was to avoid taking a straight path. Mr. Fisalis would destroy me in a contest of speed.

The whole point of this game is to give me a look at the secret tunnels. Might as well use that to my advantage to give him the slip!

Just when I was plotting to duck in and out of rooms, making good use of the various turns and stairs along the way...the starting countdown was up.

"Here I come, Vi!" I heard Mr. Fisalis yell.

I'd rather be the one giving out the orders than taking them! Time to win this thing!

*

With the second story study now behind me, I flew down the stairs to the first floor. I could hear the footsteps of Mr. Fisalis right on my heels in hot pursuit.

I stormed down the corridor. One servant I passed looked at me in confusion and asked, "What are you doing?"

Yet another laughed and commented, "More running practice?"

"Sorry! In a hurry!" was the only answer I could give them.

In my attempt to deviate from a straight path, I decided to run through the servants' dining room. *This isn't their break time, so there shouldn't be anyone around!*

Seeing as I was in a bit of a rush, I slammed open the door to the dining room, only to find Dahlia and Cartham in what I'd assumed would be an empty room.

"Eep!"

"Halt, intruder...! Wait, *Madame?!'*"

Jumping to the conclusion that I was some kind of thief, Cartham stepped up to shield Dahlia on reflex. You should have seen the look on his face when he realized it was just me!

Guarding your wife on pure instinct? Awww, now that's love! Wait, now's not the time!

"Sorry to disturb you! I'll be out of your hair in a moment!"

"What?!"

No sooner had I come rudely tramping through than I was heading right back out through the door to the kitchen, the couple left gaping in astonishment. *I bet Dahlia's gonna have my head for this later... I'd better brace myself.*

Just as I left the kitchen, it sounded like Mr. Fisalis had come running into the dining room.

"Not you too, Master Fisalis!"

"Sorry! Didn't mean to interrupt!" I heard him shout from behind me.



I ran up the staff-only staircase, which brought me out into the second floor corridor. I was pretty sure the door to the secret chamber was in one of the rooms just ahead. This seemed like as good an opportunity as any to try it out.

Relying on my mental map to guide me, I fled into the room in question.

“It should be somewhere around... A bookshelf?!”

Based on what I remembered, there was a bookshelf where the secret door ought to have been. *C’mon, man, where’s the door?! Wait...this has gotta be a cover.*

Think, Viola, think! In the maze, the door opened...inwards. That means I have to pull on it!

I placed my hand against the edge of the bookshelf and pulled. It moved much more easily than I was expecting, revealing a hole that led to the secret passage.

“Whoaaaa! No time to admire it, though!”

Mr. Fisalis’s footsteps were fast approaching.

Careful not to make any noise, I slipped through and shut the door behind me.

The inside was dimly lit and too narrow to fit more than one person at a time. I’d expected it to be pitch black, but light peeked through here and there—via strategically placed cracks in the wall, if I had to guess. Since it was the middle of the day, I could even make my way around without a lantern. Perhaps it was designed to catch the light from the other rooms at night?

Either way, it wasn’t anywhere near as dingy as I’d been imagining.

“I’d better figure out where I am on my mental map, or I’m going to end up lost. Wow, this place is carpeted?”

The carpet under my feet served to muffle the sound of my footsteps. No doubt it was designed to be soundproof. We wouldn’t want our enemies to discover our secret hiding place, after all!

First the lighting, now the carpet—I was in awe of all these ingenious

features.

Whoops! Getting caught up admiring the place sounds like a good way to get caught. I'd better get moving.

As I continued on my way, following the map in my head, I heard Mr. Fisalis's voice ring out from who-knows-where. "I know you're in here, Vi!"

Oh no, he's here! And with the way his voice is echoing, I can't tell where it's coming from. Talk about creepy! This means I'd better get out of here, huh? He knows this part of the house way better than I do. It's a shame I have to leave when I've only just gotten in here. I wanted to see the secret chamber!

Nevertheless, I weighed "exploring the hidden passage" and "not losing this game of tag" on the scales, and the latter won out.

Okay. Time to escape through the nearest door! I can check out the secret passage whenever I want!

I opened the closest door and stepped outside.

*

Going through the door brought me to one of the guest rooms on the second floor. I had the map laid out in my mind, of course, so I knew exactly where I was.

"One option is to leave, head into our bedroom, and go back to the secret chamber from there."

While I considered where to hide next, I eased open the door to the guest room and stepped out into the corridor. But then...

"Found you!"

"Uh-oh!"

Mr. Fisalis popped right out of another room!

The two of us resumed our chase down the hallway.

Tea time is so close I can taste it! I don't want to race him down a straight path, so I'd better turn a corner. Oh, the stairs! Might as well head down.

Being as careful as I could not to trip and fall, I rushed down the steps at top

speed. I soon heard Mr. Fisalis thundering down the stairs behind me.

I was hopping down the steps; he was practically flying over them. How was I going to make it out of this one?!

I made it to the bottom, rounded the corner, and... *Noooo! It's just more hallway!* I wanted to flee into another room, but I didn't have the time to open any doors.

Now I was stuck in the exact kind of straight shot track I'd been trying to avoid...but no matter. I summoned up the last of my strength to race down the corridor.

"I win, Vi!" Mr. Fisalis shouted, his voice drawing closer by the second. There was no time to look back and see *how* close he was, so I just ran as fast as my legs could carry me.

C'mon, someone come call us for tea before I get caught!

No sooner had I thought, *O God of Tea* (who?!), *hear my plea!* than there came the heavy click of someone opening the door to a room we'd just passed.

"What, pray tell, are the two of you doing?"

I automatically ground to a stop. So did Mr. Fisalis.

When we turned our heads, frozen in our tracks, it was not the God of Tea (huh?) we found standing there—it was Rohtas. The smile on his face was even scarier than usual.

"Well? Care to explain why you're running in the halls?"

"We were, uh..."

"Playing a game of tag..."

"I see. Why don't you tell me all about it in the parlor?"

"Yes, sir," we responded in unison.

We then spent the time left until afternoon tea (and beyond) subjected to one of Rohtas's lectures.

I'm sorry! A pair of grown adults playing tag in the house? I don't know what came over us.

*

“I didn’t get to see much of the hidden passage, after all.”

“Another time, maybe.”

“Show me like a normal person next time! Ugh, maybe I should ask Rohtas instead.”

“Look, I’m sorry! I swear I’ll give you a proper tour!”

Unfortunately, our game of tag had ended in a draw.

Or maybe that’s not so unfortunate for me...?

12. A Battle for the First Kiss!

The seasons came and went, and it was now the end of the year. In what felt like no time at all, almost a year had passed since Violet was born.

“It’s almost time for Flür National Day. I couldn’t do much last time around because I was carrying Lettie, but I’m back to pitching in this year!”

“All right, all right. Have it your way.”

“Hooray!”

I’d stuck to polishing silverware back when I was expecting, but this year my body was traveling a lot lighter. Now that I’d gotten Mr. Fisalis’s approval, I was going to pull out all the stops and do my part!

Violet had Mimosa and Daisy to look after her, so she’d be fine without me. Despite all my early objections to having a nanny, I was learning to rely on her these days. It was great to have her around.

*

Between the cleaning blitz and setting up the mistletoe decorations, preparations for Flür National Day were slowly but surely coming together.

But that wasn’t the only occasion we had to celebrate this time—Violet’s birthday was likewise drawing near.

“I’m glad to see Miss Lettie reach her first birthday in good health.”

“We’re as delighted as anyone to watch her grow up so fast.”

The servants seemed more excited for Violet’s big day than the national festivities.

“That should do it for the end of the year and New Year’s feasts. Now to figure out what I’m doing for Miss Lettie’s birthday.”

“Woo! I can’t wait!”

“You can count on Uncle Cartham!”

Over in the kitchen, upon finishing his preparations for the New Year's meals, Cartham turned his attention to the menu for Violet's birthday celebration.

"She's still too young for grown-up foods, so let's stick to a vegetable-based menu."

"Yeah, that sounds like a good idea."

"I'm sure Lord and Lady Fisalis will come bearing plenty of rare fruits and veggies!"

Good timing on their part.

My in-laws were going to be staying in the capital from the end of the year onward. Whenever they came to visit, they always brought us ample fruit and vegetables from their territory as a souvenir. That was sure to include all kinds of produce we didn't have here in Rohze; no doubt Violet would be thrilled.

"There are so many delicious vegetables grown in the Fisalis territory! I'm a big fan myself."

"That's the beauty of farm-fresh produce."

"Exactly!"

I was practically drooling at the thought of the salad to come.

"Now what should we do for dessert?" Cartham wondered, his mind already elsewhere.

Dessert?! Oh boy, I'm hyped already!

Wait, no! I'm not the star of this celebration—Violet is.

"Normally we'd go for a pastry loaded with cream and fruit, but I've never tried feeding her anything that rich before."

"Precisely the issue."

"We could take this opportunity to introduce her to a new taste...oor...maybe not."

"That'd be pushing it, I think."

"Yeah, probably."

We need a dessert appropriate for Violet, who still hasn't learned to eat grown-up foods... What should we do?

While I was racking my empty brain, Cartham struck his palm with his fist in an epiphany. "How about a fruit tower?"

Now that sounds like a good idea!

"A fruit tower?"

"*Oui!* I'll stack various kinds of fruit together, all beautifully cut and decorated!"

"Ooh, good idea! Lettie can handle fruit!"

"Precisely." Cartham shot me a charming wink.

"Man, I'm already drooling! Won't it be a lot of work to cut everything into pretty shapes, though?"

"Don't worry—I'll make Tin handle that part."

"Poor Tin..."

Cartham's son, Tinctorius, was supposed to be coming home for the New Year's holidays. The poor guy was getting work dumped in his lap before he'd even arrived!

Once the end of the year rolled around, Quince—who was on break from school—and Tinctorius—who had taken time off for New Year's—both arrived at the manor. Mother and Father Fisalis made their trip from Le Pied as well—and at long last, Flür National Day was here.

*

"Who cares about the ceremony? We're all *really* here to celebrate Lettie's birthday."

Very candid of you, Mother Fisalis.

"Lettie's young enough to skip out on tomorrow's ceremony, I'd say," said Father Fisalis.

"Agreed," my husband replied. "We can leave Mimosa and the rest of the servants to look after her. Vi, you're coming with us this year."

“Are you *sure* I can’t play hooky two years in a row?”

“Not a chance.”

That part aside, it was a good call. There was no point bringing a baby to such a boring—*ahem*, solemn ceremony.

“Okay. But I’m coming home as soon as the event is over.”

“That’s fair. Guess we’ll have to put a pin in our usual side trip.”

Mr. Fisalis and I would always go to the church downtown after the New Year’s event at the royal palace, but not this year. We’d have Violet waiting for us back home, after all.

As my husband and I were discussing our plans for Flür National Day, Father Fisalis chimed in, “Count us in. We’re going home when you do.”

“What he said!” said Mother Fisalis. “It wouldn’t do to keep Lettie waiting. All four of us ought to head home straightaway.”

My in-laws were both on board. The plan was to make it back to the manor as soon as possible.

*

Everyone spent the morning of Flür National Day running around getting ready to go out.

“We’ll be home soon. Be a good girl while we’re gone, okay, Lettie?”

“Ay.”

“Have fun with Daisy and Quince.”

“Ay!”

It hurt to leave our darling Violet behind, but that was all the more reason for us to get in and out of that ceremony as fast as we could!

And so, we left for the royal palace.

I wanted to get home ASAP—both because I wanted to get out of the spotlight and because I was nervous about leaving Violet at the manor without us. The whole time the king was giving his yawn-worthy (whoops, let that one

slip!) speech, I was practically glaring daggers as I willed him to wrap it up already.

“You were paying pretty close attention today,” Mr. Fisalis said to me after the fact. It seemed I’d played the part of a good listener completely by accident.

“Next you’ll be paying a visit to the sanctuary, correct?” His Majesty asked Father Fisalis, only to have his invitation unceremoniously rejected.

“No. I’m heading straight home.”

“Huh?”

“See you around!”

With that, the entire Fisalis family stood up and took our leave. “Lettie’s waiting for us! Hurry!” was our mantra.

*

“Speaking of Flür National Day, I’d better give Lettie a kiss,” said Father Fisalis, the thought having occurred to him during our carriage trip home.

Good thinking! I was in too much of a hurry to remember this morning, but I need to give her a kiss under the mistletoe when we get home!

“She was born after the holiday had passed, so we never managed to give her a good luck kiss last year,” added Mother Fisalis.

“Yeah.”

At the time, I’d been convinced that if she was born on Flür National Day, getting a mistletoe kiss from everyone around the manor would make her the happiest girl in the world. The plan hadn’t worked out in the end, but she’d turned out pretty happy regardless. All’s well that ends well.

So wait...wouldn’t that make this one Violet’s “first kiss”?

“Omigosh! We’re talking Lettie’s first kiss here!”

“Huh? Oh—you’re right!” Mr. Fisalis came to the same realization. “Lettie’s first kiss, eh? I’d say that privilege ought to belong to her father.”

He looked like he meant business, but I wasn’t about to let that one slide!

“Hello? *I’m* the one who gave birth to her! It should be me!”

My vehement protest left Mr. Fisalis momentarily flummoxed. “Hrk...”

“Then it’s settled—”

I get first dibs! was on the tip of my tongue.

“No! But what about her pop-pop, who’s always thinking of her from afar?!”

“Would it kill you to defer to your elders once in a while? We’ve only got so many years left to live, you know! Consider Nana’s name in the hat!”

Oh, c’mon, Mother Fisalis, you’re still in the prime of your life! Funny how you only bust out the “grandma” card when it’s convenient!

“That settles it. The kiss goes to her father.”

“No, it should go to her mom! I’m the one working myself to the bone to raise her!”

“No, to her poor pop-pop who never gets to see her!”

“To her nana who loves her more than anyone in the world!”

Everyone was volunteering to be the chosen one, and not a single one of us was willing to back down. Even I wasn’t about to bend the knee on this one!

“Fine. We’ll let Lettie choose, then.”

“Good thinking.”

“You’re on!” the in-laws sounded off.

We weren’t having any luck reaching an agreement, but everyone was willing to go along with Mr. Fisalis’s idea.

So we’re going to let Violet decide. Oho, doesn’t that work out in my favor? I mean, I’m the one she spends the most time with each and every day! Ho ho ho! My condolences to the rest of you!

I went home to the manor, confident I had already won.

*

“C’mon, Lettie! Make your choice!”

“Um?”

The moment we walked through the front door, Mr. Fisalis, Father Fisalis, Mother Fisalis, and I all ducked under a bough of mistletoe and began calling out to Lettie.

All right, folks, it's time for the first annual "Violet's Favorite" Championship! The winner will receive—you guessed it—our little girl's first kiss! Or something like that.

“What's going on here?” asked Rohtas.

“We're competing for Lettie's first kiss.”

“Pardon? Oh, wait...*now* I understand.”

He looked perplexed at first, but a look at where we were standing (under the mistletoe) and the words “first kiss” clued him in to what was going on.

“Set Lettie down, Mimosa,” requested Mother Fisalis.

“Yes, ma'am,” she replied, lowering Violet from her arms onto the floor.

All the pieces are in place. Ready...go!

“Hey, Lettie, where's Daddy's welcome home hug?”

“Look, Lettie! Pop-Pop brought your favorite fruit!”

“Nana's got an adorable stuffed animal for you!”

“Mommy's home! Sorry to keep you waiting, Lettie.”

We clapped our hands, flashed her all sorts of enticing items, and did whatever else came to mind in our frantic attempts to win her over. Though we kept big smiles on our faces, our desperation must have come through; she did nothing but stare back at us, refusing to budge an inch.

“Lettie!”

At long last, Violet—who had been sitting on the floor of the entrance hall and staring at us unblinkingly—wriggled into motion.

That's it! Come to me!

Everyone watched her with bated breath, dying to know who was going to be

the lucky winner.

“Kee!”

Violet began to crawl towards Quince and Daisy.

“Quince?!” we all shouted in disbelief, collapsing on the spot.

The boy in question turned sheepish in the face of our distress. “Um... I don’t get what’s happening, but I’m sorry, I guess?”

“It’s fine... Don’t worry about it,” Mr. Fisalis tried to assure him, but the tears in his eyes really ruined the effect.

And so the kerfuffle ended with Quince winning Violet’s first kiss.

But there’s always next year!

13. Lettie's First Words

"Oh!"

Violet was finally learning to form words, and that was one of her favorite things to say these days: "oh."

"What's 'oh' supposed to mean?" Mr. Fisalis wondered.

"Hmm... No idea," I replied.

Neither of us had a clue what it meant. We could only watch as she smiled and continued to say, "Oh."

But eventually, the meaning of that sound became clear.

"Ohtah!"

One day, all of a sudden, the word had leveled up from "oh" to "ohtah."

"Wow! Her vocabulary's growing! Mr. Fisalis would be so happy if he were around to hear it."

"It's a shame he's at work."

"He always has the worst timing. What's 'Ohtah,' though?" I posed my question to the servants, giving a puzzled tilt of my head. Even now that it was up to two syllables, I still had no clue what it meant.

"Ohtah!" The next time she said it, Violet was looking straight at Rohtas.

"'Ohtah'... Oh! Do you think she's trying to say 'Rohtas'?" I asked the butler himself, struck with the sudden realization.

That seemed to click for him too. "Oh... Now that you mention it, it does sound that way."

Just to be certain, I pointed at Rohtas and asked her, "Who's this, Lettie?"

"Ohtah."

That settled it.

“Gosh... So Lettie’s first word is ‘Rohtas,’ huh?”

“This may be presumptuous of me, but I must admit I’m quite pleased.”

Hearing Violet’s first words had me overcome with emotion, while Rohtas cracked a delighted smile.

“But ‘Rohtas’? Not ‘mommy’ or ‘daddy’? I wonder why,” I murmured as I gazed down at Violet, who was looking at the butler with a smile.

“Because ‘Rohtas’ is the most commonly used word in this house, no?” Mimosa cheerfully suggested.

Oh, good point!

The word (or name, I guess?) that Mr. Fisalis, the servants, and I all said most often was “Rohtas.” With how many times Violet was hearing it a day, it was no wonder it was the first word she learned. That checked out.

Besides, Rohtas *did* love to pamper her! (That went for everybody in the mansion, though!) “Huh! Now I get it. Still, Cercis’s gonna cry when he hears this.”

“I’m sure.”

Picturing his reaction with ease, a rueful smile rose to the servants’ faces.

*

But seriously, now that I was thinking about it, Mr. Fisalis had started off the morning with, “Rohtas, about my personal plans for the day...”

And from there...

“Rohtas! Where do we put this?”

“Rohtas, Cartham said he wants to talk to you about purchasing the next batch of ingredients.”

“There’s a letter for you, Rohtas.”

“I think that’s enough training for today, Rohtas!”

And so on and so forth. The whole day was one big “Rohtas” parade. And since Violet spent most of her hours in the parlor, she had front row seats to

the spectacle whether she liked it or not.

“Rohtas. Do you remember the matter I asked you about earlier?”

“As a matter of fact, I do.”

Even now, Violet was watching as Dahlia flagged the man down for a discussion.

“No wonder she learned his name.”

“Indeed.”

And is it just me, or do we work Rohtas way too hard around here?

*

“Have you and Lettie been well?” Mr. Fisalis asked.

He was saying it a lot more conversationally now, but it was the same line that always used to follow his “I’m home” toward the start of our marriage. Of course, back *then* he’d disappear off to the cottage as soon as it’d left his mouth, so it was high time I let that go.

Filling him in on how the day had gone was a part of my routine, but today I had something special to report.

“Yes! We had a great time today. Plus, I have some big news!”

“Hmm? What is it?”

The meaning of Lettie’s “oh” had finally been revealed. I had to wonder what kind of face my husband was going to make when he learned the truth.

“Lettie said her first word today.”

He looked surprised. “What? She did?”

Oh, but just wait until you hear that it was “Rohtas”! I was smiling just thinking about it. *No, no—I can’t spill the beans just yet. Restraint is key!*

“Yeah. You know how she’s been saying ‘oh’ a lot lately?”

“Uh-huh.”

“We found out what she’s been trying to say with that. It even evolved from ‘oh’ to ‘ohtah.’”

“Huh? Really?”

“Yep. Hey, Lettie, who’s this?” I asked right before my astonished husband’s eyes, suddenly pointing to our butler.

Violet smiled and answered, “Ohtah.”

“Ohtah... Oh, so it’s ‘Rohtas’! *That’s* what ‘oh’ meant all along. But I can’t believe this... ‘*Rohtas*’ is the first word Lettie learned?!”

Mr. Fisalis was clearly devastated to discover the true meaning of “Ohtah.”

“Well, what can you do? It’s got to be the word she hears most often.”

“Yeah... You’ve got a point...”

He looked like he’d begrudgingly accepted the explanation, at least!

*

“Lettie, this is ‘daddy,’ okay? Go on—say it.”

“Kay!”

“Not, not the ‘okay’ part! Dad-dy!”

“Kay!”

“Please, Lettie... Daddy wants to hear you say his name!”



Since that little incident, Lettie's vocabulary had grown exponentially. She could respond to things with "okay," and she could manage easy words like "ball."

And as for Mr. Fisalis? Whenever he had a moment to spare, he spent it giving Violet a crash course(?) in how to say "daddy." Rohtas beating him to the punch had been a bitter pill to swallow, it seemed.

He was currently in the middle of giving Violet a lesson atop his lap, but it didn't seem to be going too well if the sour look on his face was any indication.

"Oh, I know! If I make everyone else in the mansion call me 'daddy,' I bet she'll pick up the word faster!"

"Cercis, please. Nobody's going to agree to that."

"No? And here I thought it was a great idea."

"Besides, no one here says your name as often as Rohtas's."

"It's true, but you shouldn't say it."

Crestfallen, Mr. Fisalis squeezed Violet against his chest. But c'mon! No duh we didn't use his name that much—he wasn't home most of the day!

And then...

"Dada! Hee hee!" Violet giggled at her demoralized father.

Huh? What did she just say?

I looked over at Violet with a start, and Mr. Fisalis seemed to have come to the same realization.

"Lettie? What did you just say?"

"Kay!"

"No, not *that*! Wait, I have an idea. Lettie, who's this?" he asked her, pointing to himself.

"Dada," Violet answered with a giant grin.

"Oh, Lettie! You've made Daddy's day! Did you hear that, Vi? Did you?!"

"Yep! Loud and clear!"

“I can’t believe she learned it so soon after I started teaching her! Our little girl’s a genius!”

Overjoyed, Mr. Fisalis pulled Violet into another tight hug. I wasn’t sure about the genius part, but it seemed my husband’s persistence had won the day!

*

One day, sometime later:

“Sorry... They’re back again.”

“Uh...”

“Good to see you!” came a chorus of voices.

When I went to greet my husband at the door, I found that he’d brought his subordinates home with him.

“I’m afraid they overheard me telling Corydalis that Lettie had finally learned how to talk.”

“Oh my! I see!”

Mr. Fisalis looked dead on his feet—but his co-workers seemed to be enjoying themselves, so I supposed it all evened out. Besides, I was used to getting mobbed by the knights at this point.

“Well, since they’ve come all this way, we may as well have dinner—”

“No need to show them so much hospitality. I was planning to kick them out as soon as they’d gotten a look at Lettie.”

“Don’t be such a tyrant!” the crowd yelled back.

We were a little late serving dinner due to the short-notice Guest Shift, but the knights were having such a great time flocking to Violet that no one seemed to mind.

“Hey, Lettie! I’m Angelica! An-ge-li-ca!”

“Ann!”

“Omigosh! Did you guys hear that? She called me ‘Ann’!” Angelica was practically jumping for joy.

“Okay, Lettie, what about me? Alkanna! Al-kan-na!”

“Al!”

“Aww, I hope you never stop calling me that!” said Alkanna, a huge smile plastered over her face as she hugged the little girl close.

Finally, it was Chamomile’s turn. She looked at Violet, still cradled in Alkanna’s arms, and said, “Listen up, Lettie! Your big sis here is called Chamomile! Cham-o-mile!”

“...Camee?”

“Looks like that name was a little too tricky for her.”

“I’m impressed, though! The little girl’s got a knack for nicknames.”

“I like it! From now on, I say everyone calls me ‘Camee’ for short!”

Chamomile seemed pleased with her brand new nickname.

“Gosh, she’s cute. *Too* cute! I wish I could take her home with me! Oh, can I? Please?” Alkanna begged Mr. Fisalis, giving Violet another tight squeeze.

“You’re not going anywhere with my little girl!” he insisted, scrambling to steal his daughter back from his subordinate.

“Meanie! That’s what you are, Vice Captain—a big, fat meanie!”

“Booo!”

“No Lettie-hogging allowed!”

“I can do whatever I want; she’s *my* daughter. Isn’t that right, Lettie?”

“Yeah!”

Showered in jeers by his subordinates, Mr. Fisalis screwed his face into a frown. Violet, on the other hand, continued to smile blissfully.

Then all of a sudden, Chamomile broke into a grin. Pointing to Mr. Fisalis, she asked, “Lettie, who’s this?”

Following where her finger was pointing, Violet stared right into my husband’s face.

“Heh heh. For your information, Lettie knows how to say ‘daddy’ now. I didn’t

spend all that time teaching her for nothing.”

Just as he was bragging to Chamomile, however...

“Some old fart who comes over a lot.”

“Huh?! I never thought I’d hear you say something so casually cruel, Lettie! Daddy’s shocked... Hold on a second—one of you girls is playing ventriloquist!”

Violet’s answer had Mr. Fisalis aghast—but it turned out it was just Angelica playing a prank from behind her.

Nice job playing along with the joke! The whole room erupted into laughter. You’re a regular comedian, Mr. Fisalis! Aren’t you proud? Okay, maybe not.

“Hey, Angelica! Who are you calling an old fart?! Don’t be rude—I’m still in my twenties!”

“That’s the part you have a problem with?!”

You’re focusing on the wrong thing, Mr. Fisalis! I thought. Now it was my turn to play the straight man.

“Besides, you’re all older than I am!”

Oh no! That’s the worst thing you could possibly say here! Look, there’s a vein popping out on the Bombshell Trio’s foreheads! And the rest of the knights are averting their eyes... Yeah, they don’t want anything to do with this.

“See this, Lettie? Your poor daddy’s getting picked on,” Mr. Fisalis said, hugging Violet close and (fake) crying.

That got a resounding laugh out of her. “Dada! Hee hee!”

“Whoa... My own daughter got a kick out of that...”

“Omigosh! Lettie said ‘Dada’!”

“Wow! She’s grown up so much since the last time we saw her.”

“Color us impressed!”

It looked like the sound of Violet’s voice had quelled the ladies’ rage. *Be glad she saved your butt there, Mr. Fisalis!*

It went without saying that the knights loved Violet, but it looked like they

were equally fond of their vice captain. It was nice to watch them all having fun teasing each other. Heck, whenever he was with his subordinates, Mr. Fisalis couldn't fire off the comebacks fast enough.

Here *I* was so delighted every time I got to see a new side of my husband; why on earth did *he* seem to hate having his co-workers over so much?

14. The Guests Keep Coming

The knights of the order weren't the only ones who came running to the manor as soon as they heard the news that Violet had started talking.

"Hi, Lettie! It's your grandpa!"

"Granny's here too!"

Mother and Father Fisalis had also zoomed straight to Rohze.

"Pop-Pop?"

"That's me, all right! Your pop-pop!"

"Nana?"

"You got it—I'm your nana! Oh, that name is music to my ears!"

Both my in-laws were over the moon to hear Violet call out to them. Since "Grandpa" and "Granny" were still too difficult for her to manage, she'd ended up shortening their names, but that only sounded even more precious.

"Lettie's getting cuter by the day," said my father-in-law.

"You said it," agreed Mother Fisalis. "Hey, we should go look at some new clothes for her tomorrow!"

"Ooh, good idea."

"We can buy her lots of toys while we're at it!"

The in-laws were going crazy gushing over their adorable grandchild. Though if you asked me, they'd bought her more than enough clothes and toys already.

"No, that's okay! She really doesn't need that much stuff!"

"Are you sure? This little girl could make anything look good, so it's hard to resist the urge to buy out the whole store!"

"I'm afraid there's only so many outfits one girl can wear."

"I suppose so. That's too bad."

You don't sound too convinced there, Mother Fisalis!

With the kind of money Pop-Pop and Nana had at their disposal, I was afraid Violet was about to end up with yet another mountain of dresses and trinkets.

"Babies grow up fast, so I'd love it if you could buy her a new wardrobe *after* she's gotten a little bigger!"

"You would?"

"Absolutely!"

"Well, if you insist."

"Thanks!"

Fortunately, I'd managed to rein her in.

Having given up on their shopping trip, Mother and Father Fisalis changed their plans to "bragging about their grandchild" and left to pay a visit to the royal palace.

*

My in-laws' visit was the first thing Mr. Fisalis mentioned upon coming home from work. "I wasn't expecting to see mother and father show up out of the blue," he commented.

"Yeah, they told me they wanted to go brag about their granddaughter."

"And they certainly did. Boy, was I surprised to find *them* when His Majesty summoned me to the throne room."

"Huh? The king invited you to join them?"

"Yeah. And he made me give a whole report on how much Lettie's grown."

"Whoa..."

Who do you think you are, Your Majesty? Her uncle?! What's so interesting about hearing how another guy's kid is doing? I don't get it.

"If this keeps up, you're never going to get called before the king to do anything *but* sing your daughter's praises."

"Oh, it's one of the few pleasures of my parents' golden years. Let them have

it.”

“Sure...”

I dropped the subject at my husband’s request...but how long before we started getting formal complaints about our family’s insufferable bragging?

*

Fast-forward to a few days later. We had yet another guest—and we’d reeled in an awfully big catch this time.

“I was already in the area for an inspection, so I figured I might as well drop by.”

“Precisely! We just happened to be in the neighborhood!”

Who should come waltzing through our carriage porch but the king and queen themselves?!

“Did they tell us they were coming today?” I whispered to Rohtas.

“No. This is the first we’ve heard of it.”

“Cercis didn’t know either?”

“No, ma’am.”

I was right—this wasn’t on the schedule. Mr. Fisalis hadn’t mentioned a word of it either. Heck, it was the middle of the work day, so he wasn’t even home.

When I looked past the king and queen, I saw Mr. Fisalis’s boss—the head of the Royal Guard, Captain Permam—shooting a contrite glance our way. Behind *him*, the Bombshell Trio were pressing their hands together in apology.

So I’m guessing that means the royal couple snuck over without telling Mr. Fisalis.

My head was spinning from this shocking turn of events, but there was no use crying over spilled milk. The only thing to do was to suck it up and show them our best hospitality.

“We appreciate you going out of your way to pay us a visit, Your Majesty.”

While Rohtas, a few maids, and I gave the royal couple a warm welcome, the

rest of the servants transitioned straight into the Guest Shift: Special Edition! Stellaria went to fetch my in-laws from the cottage, while Dahlia scurried back and forth between the kitchen and parlor, getting things ready for our guests at breakneck speed.

“Sorry to have come on such short notice.”

Yeah, you better be—was the absolute *last* thing I was going to say in this situation.

“Don’t be! We’re thrilled to have you,” I said, hiding my distress behind a smile.

“Angulata told us all about how Violet’s learned to talk, and the ladies here have been positively gushing about how adorable she is! We’ve been dying to come see her.” Her Majesty gave a cheerful trill of a laugh.

Cool, but that doesn’t mean you have to barge in willy-nilly! Give a girl some time to prepare herself!

No sooner had we ushered the royals inside the mansion than Mother and Father Fisalis stepped out of the parlor. It seemed they’d come in from the garden rather than bothering with the front door.

“We didn’t expect to see *you* here, Your Majesty!”

“After all those great stories you told us about your granddaughter, how could we possibly stay away?” the king replied.

“Aw, can you blame us for talking her up? She’s cute as a button!” said Mother Fisalis.

“Considering her mother, it’s no wonder she turned out so delightful. Say, what should I have her call me?”

From the sound of it, even the queen herself wanted to hear Violet say her name.

I don’t think she could manage “Your Majesty” yet, I thought to myself, attempting to brainstorm some better options.

Beside me, my father-in-law suggested, “Hmm... How about Pops and Gram?”

Omigosh, Father Fisalis! You can't just say that!

"Good God, Lobata! When are you going to learn some respect?"

"Aha ha ha! Come now, it was only a joke."

My parents-in-law and the royal couple were having a great time chatting away, but I was breaking out into a cold sweat just listening to their banter.

Let's be realistic here. "Your Majesty" would be too much of a mouthful for Violet. And "Pops" and "Gram" are out of the question! We could never teach her to say something so improper!

"So? Where *is* Lettie?"

"I want a look at her!"

The king and queen were pacing around the parlor in search of her, but Violet was off playing with Mimosa and Daisy in the nursery.

"She's in another room at the moment. We'll bring her in right away."

With that, I sent one of the maids to go fetch her.

*

To Violet, the king and queen were nothing but a pair of unfamiliar adults; fortunately, though she gave them a blank stare, she wasn't anxious enough to burst out crying. No doubt Mr. Fisalis's subordinates had built up her immunity to "strange grown-ups."

"Ooh, so *you're* the Lettie I've heard so much about."

"Yeah!"

"And you even know how to respond? What a smart girl."

"Yeah!"

It really was impressive that she could answer his questions despite having no idea what he was saying!

Are those her innate social skills at work? Is it something in the Fisalis family blood?! Okay, probably not.

"I'm His Majesty, king of Flür."

“Floo...?”

“No, *that’s* not my name.” Struggling to get his point across, the king cracked a strained smile. “Call me ‘Your Majesty.’”

“Uh?”

I couldn’t help but laugh as Violet screwed her little baby face into a confused frown. *Yeaah, that one’s gonna be tough...*

“Hrm... Too long, eh?” Now the king was frowning too.

“You have to give her something easier to say,” Father Fisalis suggested.

“I see. Then how about ‘King’? Lettie, say ‘King’!” he tried, pointing a finger at himself.

“Keen?”

This time, it seemed to have gotten through.

“You got it! I’m the king! Great job, Lettie.”

“Keen!”

“Very nice, very nice.”

You look totally smitten, Your Majesty!

“Shall I be ‘Belle,’ then?” Her Majesty proposed.

“That one’s a stretch.”

“Quiet, you!” she snapped at Father Fisalis’s dig. However, as soon as she noticed Violet’s curious eyes staring up at her, she fixed her smile back into place. “*Ahem.* Lettie, I’m the queen! ‘Queen’!”

“Ween...?”

“That’s right. Very good, Lettie!” The queen looked just as charmed as her husband.

In the end, we managed to land on “Keen” and “Ween.” All’s well that ends well.

“Now that Dianthus is all grown up, I’d almost forgotten how cute babies can be.”

“You said it, dear. He’s turned into a little terror, but he was such a darling when he was Lettie’s age. Oh, what a soothing presence she is! She’s so cute. Positively precious!”

Delighted to hear Violet say her name, Her Majesty couldn’t stop rambling about how adorable she was.

“The princesses are dying to meet her too.”

“Bring her over to the royal palace sometime, will you?”

“Though I’ll warn you—we might be tempted to keep her around forever.”

The way the queen had said that with a straight face gave me the sinking feeling that she was being dead serious.

Oh no! Do we have to worry about the royal family kidnapping our daughter?! Careful now—there’s no telling what he might do if it comes to that!

While that maybe-joke-maybe-not had me sweating bullets, Father Fisalis interjected, “We certainly couldn’t have that. If you don’t plan on letting her go, I’m afraid we’ll have to take her back by force.”

Whoa—what a terrifying look my father-in-law’s got right now!

“What he said. Or perhaps we ought to keep her away from the royal palace altogether?”

Mother Fisalis’s smile isn’t any less intimidating! Man, these two might be an even bigger force to be reckoned with than their son.

“Look, we’re sorry! We promise to send her home, so please don’t hesitate to bring her over!”

“You’d *better*,” came Mother and Father Fisalis’s joint retort.

The royal family was no match for my in-laws.

The apple sure didn’t fall too far from the tree. It’s moments like this when I can see the family resemblance.

*

With Violet around, the Fisalis manor was more full of life than ever before. Who ever would have thought the day would come?

Side Story: Flür Day is Almost Here

1. Flür Day is Almost Here

The cold had loosened its grip on the Flür Kingdom, paving the way for a string of warm days. It was nearly time for the year-end festivities, and every household in the nation was busy getting ready to ring in the new year.

Violet watched in wonder as the servants dashed back and forth through the mansion, all of them in an even greater hurry than usual.

“What’s Flür Day?”

Now that she’d developed a better understanding of the world around her, our daughter was smack dab in the middle of her “what, why, and how” phase. This wasn’t her first Flür Day, but this time she must have gotten curious about the “why” of the celebration.

“Flür National Day is our kingdom’s birthday.”

“Its birthday?”

“Yep. You know how we call the day you were born your ‘birthday’? It’s just like that. We call the day our kingdom was born ‘Flür Day.’”

“Huh...”

The first day of the month of Flür marked the start of a new year in our kingdom. It also happened to be the anniversary of our nation’s founding *and* the birthday of our reigning king, making it quite the joyous occasion.

Each household had its own New Year’s traditions, and here at the Fisalis manor, we celebrated by gathering the whole family around the dinner table. Some people liked to go all out and throw big New Year’s Eve parties, but we preferred to avoid all the fuss and carry on as usual.

The morning of the first always began with the “Rite of Audience,” an official function chock-full of speeches. The king would give his New Year’s address,

talk about how wonderful it was that we'd reached another National Foundation Day after a year of peace, thank us for celebrating his birthday—you name it. Attendance was mandatory for us upper-class aristocrats. To make matters worse, our seats looked out over the common folk, which meant we had to keep a smile on our faces the whole time. Even after all these years, it never stopped feeling like complete torture—whoops, that was a little *too* much honesty there! But it's true—I was pretty sure I'd never get used to it for as long as I lived.

Once the speeches were done, it was time for a prayer at the sanctuary, and then everyone would go their separate ways. As soon as the official stuff was over, everyone was free to spend the day as they pleased. Mr. Fisalis and I usually wandered over to the church downtown.

There were ten days left until New Year's Day.

"Our kingdom's birthday is a special occasion, so we like to celebrate it together!"

"Together?"

"Yep. Remember how Grandpa and Granny always come to visit us on Flür Day?"

"But they visit all the time!"

"Okay, fair point! *Ahem*—but they *always* come just before Flür Day, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Err, let's see..."

Mother and Father Fisalis came by to see Violet on a regular basis, so that one hadn't made for a great example.

Just as I was brainstorming a better explanation, the little girl's eyes lit up. "Quin comes home too."

Good thinking! He's always around for the holidays!

"Yeah, exactly! Quince always gets a break from school and comes back to the manor!"

“Yay!”

“That reminds me—Uncle Tin said he’d be home for the holidays too.”

“Uncle Tin too? Wow! So many people!”

“Yep. It’s gonna be a lot of fun.”

Since schools closed for New Year’s, barring any extenuating circumstances, students living in the dorms were expected to go home for the holidays. Both Quince—Rohtas’s adopted son who was enrolled in boarding school—and Tinctorius—Stellaria’s younger brother who had finally stopped bumming around and found a job in Rohze—would be coming back to our mansion for their vacation.

Of course, though we had a few faces returning home, there were others who had to *go* home. A good handful of our servants would be off visiting their families; many of them hailed from areas outside Rohze, after all. (That’s why we could make so many different regional dishes for the staff meals.) The away team would leave for their homes as soon as the preparations for New Year’s were in place. Meanwhile, the home team’s shifts were staggered to allow them some time off.

As Quince’s biggest fan, Violet was practically counting down the days until he came home.

But hold on! There’s something else that has to happen first!

“Say, Lettie, my dear? Isn’t there something you need to do before Quince gets here?”

“What?”

“Clean your room. Don’t you want to ring in the new year with your personal space all nice and tidy?”

“Yeah!”

“And it’d be nice if Quince complimented you on how neat your room is, wouldn’t it?”

“Yeah!”

“Then go put away all the toys you left out.”

“Okay!”

She never made all that much of a mess, really, but Violet did have a *lot* of stuff in her room. Her grandparents weren’t the only offenders in this area—there was no shortage of people who loved to shower her in toys, dolls, and stuffed animals. The annual cleaning blitz was as good a time as any to get her in the habit of picking up after herself.

“Daisy, come help me,” said Violet.

“Sure.”

It looked like she had successfully enlisted some help in her endeavor.

Intent on winning Quince’s approval, Violet went to work tidying up her room. With Mimosa and a few other maids helping her out, we could go ahead and cross her room off the list of places to clean.

Since the end of the year meant cleaning the entire mansion, it was always one of our busiest times!

*

“Stocking up on food and drinks? Check. Cleaning blitz? Check... Oh, but we still have to give the cottage a thorough scrubbing. Next comes harvesting the mistletoe and hanging it up around the manor. And then...”

“Heh heh. This may be the busiest I’ve ever seen you, Madam.”

“I know I’m already a great housekeeper and all, but something about starting a new year makes me want to go above and beyond.”

“That’s a good thing, to be sure.”

Rohtas’s smile was a little on the cynical side, but he didn’t bother trying to stop me these days. I’d been given full permission to run around with the servants by the master of the house himself!

When I stepped out into the corridor, I was greeted by the sight of the servants bustling about. Over in the kitchen, meanwhile, there was bound to be a constant stream of guests coming in and out as our go-to merchants showed

up to deliver their ingredients.

This was no time for *me* to be slacking off!

That said, I didn't want to get in anyone's way, so I opted to go see Bellis and discuss what flowers we should use to decorate.

"It *is* New Year's, so I'm thinking something classy."

"Good idea. What about this? It comes into bloom right around Flür National Day."

"That sounds nice! Then let's put those up around the entrance hall and parlor."

The flower Bellis had picked out was still only a bud, but it would blossom just in time for the holidays. A feast for the eyes with a textured bloom, it was the perfect decoration for the most prominent spots in the house.

It always made my heart sing with joy to see how beautifully the flowers bloomed around this time of year.

Now that we'd picked out what flower we were going to use, all that was left was to set them out on the big day.

Anything else left to do?

2. Welcome Home

Once I'd finished discussing the flowers with Bellis, I decided to join Violet in cleaning her room. It was already looking pretty tidy thanks to the help of Mimosa, Daisy, and a few other maids, but it was hard to find a place for all her toys.

"What should we do with all these toys she doesn't play with anymore? No matter *how* big Lettie's room is, we can't leave them lying around."

So far we'd kept all her baby toys in a box for safekeeping. I wasn't about to throw away stuff that someone could still use! And for your information, no, I *wasn't* ever going to lose my instinctual need to scrimp and save.

"Your next baby can always use the same toys Lettie played with. Why don't we put them in storage for now?"

"Oh, that's a good idea! I like it."

Nice one, Mimosa! Suggesting a solution that assumes we'll be using them again? You really get me!

"Got that, guys? We're going to leave Lettie's favorite things here and move the rest to storage."

"Okay!" the rest of the team agreed.

Though I rarely had a moment to spare for thinking of anything but Violet, there was a good chance she'd have a brother or sister one day. The idea hadn't even occurred to me until Mimosa said it.

"Do you want to keep this, Lettie?"

"Yeah!"

"How about this?"

"Hmm... I don't play with that one much. Right, Daisy?"

"Yeah, I think so," her friend replied.

“Then off to storage it goes.”

I divided Violet’s toys into piles of those she was using and those she wasn’t, checking in with her to determine what went where. Daisy was her playmate most of the time, so Violet made sure to get a second opinion from her friend as she sorted her things.

Just as we were scurrying around looking for places to store the keepers and carting the storage-bound stuff away, Tinctorius popped his head into the room. “Hi, Miss Lettie! I’m home!”

“Oh, Uncle Tin!” both girls greeted him.

“Miss Lettie! Daisy! I missed you girls!”

Tinctorius pulled the duo into a bear hug, rubbing his cheeks against theirs in a show of love. And yet...

“Go away.”

“Stop it, Uncle Tin! That tickles.”

Both girls pushed him away, making their displeasure known. Then came the finishing blow.

“I have work to do,” said Lettie. “Come back later.”

“Me too. Bye,” Daisy dismissed him.

And with that, they went right back to their work(?). Talk about blunt.

Mimosa, the maids, and I burst out laughing at the stark difference in enthusiasm between Tinctorius and the girls. It was too funny.

“Ouch... Why oh why does my love never get through to them?!”

He watched as Violet and Daisy went about their work, a look of misery in his amber eyes. He actually looked so dejected that you couldn’t help but think of a kicked puppy.

Given that Tinctorius was still in his mid-twenties, it felt a little mean to have the kids call him “Uncle,” but back when I had originally told Violet to call him “Tinc,” her childish lisp had turned that into “Inkie.” Delighted with the cute nickname, Tinctorius had encouraged her to keep on using it, and thus it had

stuck to this day—in its final form of “Uncle,” that is.

It was a tragic state of affairs; Tinctorius loved the girls to pieces, yet the objects of his affection always gave him the brush-off. Then again, that overzealousness of his was part of the problem.

“Don’t let it get to you,” said Stellaria, going over to her heartbroken brother and giving him a pat on the shoulder.

“I love them so much! It’s not fair! But I’ll never stop loving them no matter *how* mean they are!”

“What a strong baby brother I have.”

The maid continued to comfort Tinctorius. He was one tough cookie, keeping his chin up in the face of the cold shoulder.

Having bounced back already, Tinctorius rummaged through the bag he’d brought with him and fished out a bottle full of golden liquid.

“Oh, Daisy, Miss Lettie! I brought you some yummy honey as a treat! Why don’t I whip you girls up a honey custard pie?”

“Yay! We love you, Uncle Tin,” the pair replied like they were reading from a script.

“That didn’t have much feeling in it, but you know what? I’ll take it!”

The whole room lapsed into a judgmental silence.

Trying to win their hearts through their stomachs, Tinctorius?

Unbothered by our patronizing looks, Tinctorius left to go bake his pie in high spirits. The guy had nerves of steel, that was for sure.

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Once he’d left, we resumed the cleaning session that had been interrupted by Tinctorius’s arrival.

“Oh, ’member this? It’s so fun!”

“Yeah!”

The girls had stopped to play with some of their nostalgic old favorites.

Did they get bored with cleaning?

That was only natural, really. Nothing could hold a little kid's attention for too long.

"Lettie—that doesn't look like work to me."

"I know...but I'm *tired*."

"Already? You still have a lot of cleaning up left to do. And you haven't even had your afternoon snack yet."

"Ugh..."

All the signs seemed to be pointing towards an incoming tantrum, but right in the nick of time a maid showed up to report: "Miss Lettie! Quince has arrived!"

"Quin's here?"

"Yay! Quin's home!"

Violet and Daisy cheered up the instant they heard the news of his arrival. These girls were nothing if not predictable.

"Indeed he is. He's putting his luggage away at the moment, but it shouldn't be too long before he comes to say hello."

"Hooray!"

Violet pounced on the maid, stars in her eyes. It was a far cry from the cold reception she'd given Tinctorius earlier.

"Sounds like you'd better finish up that cleaning as fast as you can."

"Okay!"

Hearing Quince's name had given Violet a sudden rush of motivation. *Thank goodness we've got you around, Quince!*

The maid was right; a little while later, the guest of honor put in an appearance at the nursery.

"I'm home, Madam Fisalis."

"Welcome back, Quince!"

"It's good to see you, Miss Lettie, Daisy."

“Wewcome home, Quin!”

“We missed you!”

Violet and Daisy abandoned their posts without a second thought and flung themselves at the boy.

Quince was Rohtas and Amaryllis’s adopted son, an eleven-year-old boy attending a vocational school in the royal capital. He would come home to the Fisalis manor whenever he had time off from his studies, and each time we saw him he seemed to have grown a little bigger.

“Wow, have you gotten taller since the last time we saw you, Quince?”

“I believe so, yes.”

“It won’t be long before you shoot up past Amaryllis.”

“Perhaps.”

“Ooh, did you grow your hair out too?”

“Yes. Father told me I’m to get it cut as soon as possible,” he replied, twirling a lock of his silky, caramel-brown hair around his finger and offering me a shy smile.

“No! Don’t go, Quin!”

“Come play with us!”

Violet and Daisy clung to him in protest.

“Goodness, the difference between him and Tin is night and day.”

“Let’s keep this our little secret, shall we?”

It was all Stellaria and I could do to stop ourselves from laughing.

*

Just as I was thinking we should take a break for tea, one of the maids came by to tell us that Tinctorius had whipped up a snack with the honey he had on hand. I put our cleaning session on hold, and we all went to the dining room together.

The pie was ready for us when we arrived with Tinctorius standing beside it,

awaiting the kids' reactions with bated breath.

"Omigosh! It's sooo sweet!" I cried upon having a bite.

"The boss let me bring some of that honey back when he heard I was going home to the manor."

"It must be a real treasure, then. We'd better savor it."

Given Tinctorius's place of employment, the "boss" he was referring to had to be the head chef of the royal palace. If the honey was a gift from a VIP like that, it had to be super high-end! I was sure of it.

The honey filling was to die for, but the crust was no less exquisite. The fresh-out-of-the-oven pies were light and flaky, the fragrance of the butter and the pleasant sweetness of the honey filling the mouth with each bite. What an amazing chef! He was definitely Cartham's son, no doubt about it.

"Yum!"

"Yummy!"

"It's very good."

It even had the girls' mouths watering.

"Do you like it, Miss Lettie?"

"Yeah! It's yummy! You're good at this, Uncle Tin."

"Why, you've made my day!"

Violet's compliment moved Tinctorius to tears, but his joy was short-lived.

"Want more pie, Quin?" Violet asked.

"I'm all right, thanks."

"I can eat this all the time, but you can't. Have more."

"Eat up, Quin!"

The chef watched in silence as Violet and Daisy fussed over Quince.

"What happened to winning their heart through their stomachs...?" he muttered.

“Don’t let it get to you.”

There was really nothing else to be said.

3. Let's Get Some Mistletoe

The whole manor had been cleaned in time for Flür National Day. Every nook and cranny of the place had been scrubbed to a shine, not a speck of dust to be seen.

Now that the housekeeping had been taken care of, it was time to decorate for New Year's. We would cut down a few boughs of mistletoe—a plant said to ward off evil—from our garden, then hang them up around the house.

Some families got their mistletoe from the forest, while others grew it on their own land. With such magnificent gardens at our disposal, of *course* we'd planted some ourselves!

"I hope our mistletoe is coming along nicely this year."

"Not to worry—I assure you it's more bountiful than ever."

The Demon King—I mean, uh, *Bellis* was showing me to our mistletoe grove...or mistletoe *plot*, technically. If we harvested from the same trees every year, they'd all end up bare; thus, to allow us a more systematic approach to our trimming, he'd made sure to plant a surplus. Our gardener was one smart cookie!

The mistletoe plot was located behind the cottage—right near my private garden. Each of the trees was sporting such lush foliage that I didn't doubt *Bellis* when he said the mistletoe was growing even better than last year.

"They look so good that it's almost a shame to cut them down!"

"It'll look even better next year. Promise."

So hurry up and get it over with, I sensed him silently pressuring me.

"Don't mind if I do, then! Let's see... We need one for the entrance hall and another for the parlor. Oh, and we can't forget the cottage."

"How about this one for the entryway?"

Once he knew exactly where I'd be hanging the mistletoe, *Bellis* helped me

look for good candidates. Hefty boughs or little sprigs, this or that—he picked out what he thought would work best, then had his apprentice gardeners set up a ladder and cut them down.

“Watch out for falling branches.”

“Will do!” I said.

“Okay!” came the kids’ reply a moment after mine.

When Violet had heard the grown-ups talking about the mistletoe, she had gotten it in her head that it was going to be a fun activity.

“I wanna see the miswatoe come down!” she had insisted.

“Only if you promise to stay out of Bellis’s way. Can you do that for me?”

“Yeah! I’ll have Quin with me.”

“Oh, then there shouldn’t be a problem.”

We all had an enormous amount of faith in Quince.

“Go for that one there. And be careful.”

“All right, we’ve got the rope in place!”

“There, it’s cut!”

“Let’s get this thing down!”

The gardeners cut down one of the most handsome boughs of mistletoe, then lowered it to the ground in an impressive display of teamwork.

“Wow, it looks great!”

“I think this one would go best in the entrance hall.”

“Good thinking! Take it away, then.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

As soon as we’d decided on where to hang them, the freshly cut boughs were carried straight to their new homes.

Since the sprigs kept coming down one after another, the garden was a flurry of activity with servants scrambling to and fro. Mimosa and I decided to help

out by tying some of the mistletoe with string, but in our haste to contribute, we forgot to keep an eye on the little ones.

Just then, I heard a couple of voices from behind us.

“Let’s stop here, Miss Lettie.”

“No, higher! I can’t reach!”

“I can’t lift you *that* high.”

Uh, excuse me? What are you two doing?!

I whipped around in surprise, and what did I see but Violet clinging to one of the trees!

Quince is lifting her up by the waist as high as he can, so she probably fancies herself a little climber...but if anything, she looks like a tree-hugging critter! Where did the sudden interest in tree-climbing come from, anyway?

“Hey, Lettie? You’re bothering poor Quince. What are you doing?”

“I’m gonna get a miswatoe bow!”

“You what...?”

She probably wanted to imitate what the adults were doing, but her plan was a little too ambitious.

“But you don’t know how to climb a tree, silly! And I bet Quince’s arms are getting tired by now.”

“Oh no! Put me down, Quin.”

“Oh—sure.”

Playing the Quince card was an instant solution to any Lettie-related problem; that convinced her to come down from the tree. The boy looked visibly relieved.

Sorry, little buddy. She must have been heavy, huh?

“And? Why did you decide to go tree-climbing in the first place?”

“I wanted miswatoe in my room too!”

“Oh, did you now?”

We generally only hung mistletoe in the big rooms like the entrance hall and parlor. I hadn't been *planning* to put any in her room, but it was hard to say no to those puppy eyes.

"We'll cut you down a smaller one, then," offered Bellis.

"Yaaay!"

"I want one too," said Daisy.

"Fine."

"Yippee!"

True to his word, Bellis chopped down a couple mini-sized boughs to go in Violet's and Daisy's rooms.

"Do you think you can carry this to your room, Miss Lettie?" he asked, crouching down to her eye level.

"Hmm..."

"Consider it your job."

"I have a job?"

"That's right."

"Okay! I'll try!"

"You can ask Daisy and Quince to help you out."

"Awright!"

Once she'd accepted the task, Bellis tied the mistletoe with some string to make it easier to carry. Violet did her best to lift it, her face turning red from the effort. *Is it a little too heavy for her?*

But man, Bellis was good. Busting out the word "job" as a motivator? He sure knew how to handle little kids!

"Hup! Hup!"

The trip back to the manor wasn't much distance for an adult to cover, but it was a lot harder on a small child—and one hauling a big bundle, at that.

"A-Are you okay?"

“Here, I’ll help you.”

“Thanks.”

“No, Lettie and I can do it! You watch, Quin!”

“Whatever you say.”

Violet and Daisy struggled to carry the heavy mistletoe bough, but seemed to be having fun all the while. Quince watched them with a smile that looked half-amused, half-anxious. Us adults kept an eye on the trio as they waddled off in the direction of the mansion.

*

“But really now! Climbing a tree and trying to break off some mistletoe? Just who does that girl take after?”

“I think you know the answer to that one, Madam.”

The rest of the servants seemed to be in full agreement with Bellis’s retort—and I had nothing I could say in my defense.

4. Don't Forget the Feast

We used the mistletoe boughs Bellis had cut down for us to decorate the high-traffic areas around the manor. Now that we had the grandest sprigs of mistletoe hanging in the entrance hall, it was truly starting to feel like the New Year's season. I was all but ready to run around shouting, "Happy Flür Day!"

"Nothing brings out the New Year's spirit like mistletoe," I remarked.

"Indeed," agreed Rohtas.

Even the butler, who had his hands full inspecting each room, hanging the decorations, and doing whatever else needed to be done, had to stop and admire the plant.

"We've finished decorating the rest of the rooms. Would you like to see for yourself?"

"Nah—I'll take a look later. For now, there's work to be done."

"Oh? What's next on the agenda?"

"Deciding what's on the menu! It won't be long now before Mother and Father Fisalis arrive."

"My, my. You'd better do some serious brainstorming, then."

"That's the plan! Off I go to see Cartham."

I left Rohtas and headed for the kitchen.

*

Though the kitchen clean-up was all done, the ingredients for the new year had yet to be delivered or sorted, so the place wasn't as busy as it could have been.

"Is Cartham around?"

"Yeah. Over there," said one of the cooks.

"Hm?"

I glanced in the direction he'd pointed, and there I found a certain someone sitting in a corner of the servants' dining room, giving off some seriously ominous vibes.

He was holding his head in his hands, as still as a statue. Never before had he felt so difficult to approach. Where had the Cartham I knew and loved gone off to?!

"Uh... That *is* Cartham, right?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I take it he hasn't settled on a menu yet?"

"He's struggling to come to a decision."

I *sloooowly* sidled over to the chef in question and peered at his face, only to find him glaring down at a blank sheet of paper. He was like a totally different person compared to his usual easygoing self. Heck, he hadn't even registered that I was there.

"And we can't order anything until he knows what he'll be making, huh?"

"Exactly. If he doesn't decide soon, we might not get the ingredients in time," the cook explained, a troubled look on his face.

"I get it! Well, everybody has days like that, don't they?" There wasn't a person in the world who'd never gone through a slump.

I asked the cook to prepare some tea for the two of us, then took the seat across from Cartham.

"Hey, Cartham. Decided what's on the menu yet?"

"Oh, *Madame*! I didn't see you come in!"

"I've been here for a while now."

"My apologies for the oversight, then. Uncle Cartham is in a bit of a bind, you see... I'm fresh out of ideas."

"And here I never thought I'd see the day. You always manage to come up with the tastiest of dishes!"

"What *could* the issue be? I'm not even sure myself," Cartham said with an

exaggerated shrug.

“It doesn’t have to be anything too fancy. As a matter of fact, anything *too* rich is gonna be murder on my stomach, so why not keep it simple and use the same ingredients we always do?”

“I suppose that’s not a bad idea...”

“Should we bust out the usual regional dishes?”

“Ha ha ha! Not for New Year’s, I’m afraid.”

He finally laughed like his usual self.

“Racking your brains *too* hard is just going to leave you even more stuck. Why not make the kids a snack for a change of pace?”

“If only I could...”

“Huh?”

Cartham threw a glance across the room. When I followed his gaze, there was Tinctorius, happily working away on some new creation.

“Dun-dun-da-da! For today’s treat, we have ourselves a pudding topped with a healthy helping of fruit!”

From the looks of things, he was humming his own little made-up tune as he whipped up a snack for Violet and her friends. He’d inherited his father’s happy-go-lucky personality—and his formidable skill with a kitchen knife too. The way he could turn a piece of fruit into anything from a flower to a bird was a sight to behold.

Tinctorius took over snack duty again, I see. Yesterday he made that pie, and now he’s whipping up a pudding... Oh man, I can’t wait for tea time! I mean, uh...back to the point!

“Your son robbed you of your distraction, huh?”

“You got it... Weh.”

Cartham’s melodramatic reaction was almost as funny as Tinctorius’s total obliviousness to the fact that *he* was the source of his dad’s slump.

“There, there. Let’s leave the snacks to him and focus on the dinner to come.

Let's see... How about some kind of meat confit? That's Mr. Fisalis's favorite."

I wasn't too familiar with the ins and outs of fine cuisine, but I went ahead and named one of my husband's dishes of choice, hoping it might give Cartham some sort of inspiration.

And wouldn't you know it?

"That's a great idea! And it doesn't *have* to be meat—I could make a confit of some seasonal fruits and vegetables while I'm at it."

"Mm-hmm!"

"Shall we poach the fish?"

"Yeah, that sounds good!"

It seemed I'd managed to light a fire under our chef.

Once he had a prompt to start from, the ideas began pouring forth one after the other, and he jotted each of them down in a furious scribble. Our Cartham was a regular treasure trove of creativity.

In no time at all, what had been a blank sheet of paper was filled with notes on the names of dishes, their ingredients, and how to cook them.

"Wow... Impressive! You're so good at this, Cartham."

"I'm flattered to hear you say that, *Madame*. But of course, it was *your* hint that got me past my mental block! *Merci!*"

Then, as always, he took my hand in a sweeping gesture and kissed it. Yep, he was definitely back to his normal self.

"Aww, don't mention it!"

I chose to simply shut up and take the compliment.

With Cartham's slump conquered, we managed to decide on the menu. We could finally move on to ordering the ingredients!

Now that they had work to do, the cooks flew into action. Rohtas joined us in the kitchen, and then it was time to start reviewing the ingredient list. We called for our go-to merchants so that he and Cartham could put in our order.

The kitchen had burst into a frenzy of activity, the relaxed atmosphere from earlier nowhere to be seen. Thus, we decided to move to the dining room and have our afternoon snack.

*

Tinctorius snuck in with a plateful of pudding when the maids brought us our tea.

“Today’s special treat is pudding! Enjoy!”

“Yay! Thanks!” the girls whooped.

As per usual, “the girls” happened to include me. You better believe I was going to have a taste of that snack!

“Do you like it, Miss Lettie? Daisy?”

“Yeah!” the pair replied.

“All right—*now* I’ve got them by the stomachs! See what delicious treats I can make, Miss Lettie? Do you like me now?”

“Yeah!”

“Woohoo!”

Tinctorius raised a fist in triumph, but not for long.

“You’re my next-next favorite after Quin. No, next-next-next-next-next...”

“That’s scraping the bottom of the barrel!”

Violet frowned in thought as she counted off people on her fingers. To be fair, he was almost never around the house...but then again, neither was Quince.

Once we’d finished off our delicious snack, we went to the servants’ dining room to help the maids clean up. The negotiations with our suppliers must have finally finished, seeing as Cartham had gone back to the table to write something down on his sheet of paper.

“What are you up to now? Jotting down a recipe before you forget?”

“Oh, no. I’m making a sketch of my mental image before I lose it.”

“What mental image?”

We gathered around Cartham and took a peek at his work. The product of this fluid, uninterrupted flourish of his hand was a picture of one tasty-looking confit atop a plate.

“Wow, that looks downright mouthwatering! I didn’t know you were such a talented artist, Cartham.”

I was surprised at how good the drawing was. It was only a rough sketch, yet it perfectly conveyed the look he was going for.

“Merci!”

“Do you always make a point of doing this?”

I’d advised him on the dinner menu countless times before, but this was the first time I’d seen him make a sketch.

“Not usually. I only bother for formal dinners, or when I’m trying out a new recipe.”

“Huh, I see!”

Cartham kept on drawing the whole time he was explaining, filling the page with more and more sketches of tasty-looking foods.

“I always have an image of what I want a dish to look like, and putting it on paper is the only way to share that vision with my apprentices.”

“Interesting! So it’s how you convey information!”

“You got it.”

That made sense. Drawing a picture was the easiest way to get his ideas across to the other cooks.

While I was admiring the finished sketches, Violet and Daisy gawked at the artwork with stars in their eyes.

“Wow! That looks good!”

“Yum!”

“I bet it beats the pudding!”

“What?!”

It's nice of you to compliment Cartham's drawings, but you don't have to put down Tinctorius while you're at it! You're going to bring the poor guy to tears!

"I wanna draw too," said Violet.

"What, no more interest in helping with the clean-up?" I asked.

"Nope!"

It looked like she'd gotten bored of being the grown-ups' little helper. But that was fine by me; having *something* to keep her busy would make things easier on the rest of us, at least.

The moment one of the maids brought them a piece of paper and a pen, Violet and Daisy jumped straight into drawing. With that, the impromptu Servants' Dining Room Art Awards had begun.

"What should I draw?" my daughter pondered.

"I'm gonna draw that fruit over there."

"Oh! Me too!"

The subject Daisy had spotted was an arrangement of fruit slices over a plate. The leftovers that hadn't made it into our pudding, no doubt!

He cut it into such pretty shapes that I can't imagine it'll be too easy to draw...

Violet and Daisy fought a long, hard battle against the blank canvas.

"I can't make it look yummy..."

"Me neither."

Just as the girls were getting down on themselves, struggling to get their pictures to come out the way they wanted, a maid showed up with an announcement.

"Madam, Master Fisalis has returned."

5. Who's Got Skill?

We rushed to the entrance hall, where we found Mr. Fisalis chatting with Rohtas.

"Wewcome home, Daddy!"

"Hi there, Lettie. Were you a good girl while I was gone?"

"Yeah!"

As he usually did, Mr. Fisalis scooped his daughter off the ground as she flung herself at him, only to notice that she was holding something in her hand.

"What's this piece of paper?"

"Daisy and I were drawing pictures."

"Oh, how nice."

Violet showed Mr. Fisalis the drawing she'd been working on earlier.

"But it's not vewy good."

"There, there. Drawing isn't easy," he said, giving his glum little girl a pat on the head.

"Hey, Daddy?"

"Yes, sweetie?"

"Draw something!" she declared, shoving the paper and pen towards him.

"What?!"

Mr. Fisalis stared at the supplies thrust upon him in dismay. That was odd—usually he'd be happy to jump into whatever game Violet wanted to play with him.

What, is he that bad an artist?

He looked back and forth between Violet's beaming face and the paper, his brows drawn into a frown.

Should I throw him a lifeline?

“Daddy’s tired from work, Lettie,” I said. “You shouldn’t spring—”

“I wanna see Daddy’s drawing!”

“Wow, she’s being pretty stubborn about this.”

Our daughter shook her head back and forth, refusing to back down.

“Well, you heard the girl, Cercis.”

“...Fine. I’ll give it a try.”

I don’t think this situation merits a look of such grim determination!

Violet and I waited in the parlor while he went to his room to change out of his uniform.

“What’s he gonna draw?” she wondered aloud, bursting with excitement.

Mr. Fisalis showed up as soon as he was done getting dressed, and Violet bounded over to hand him the paper and pen.

“So? What would you like Daddy to draw for you, sweetie?” he asked.

“Umm... Me, and the manor, and flowers...”

“That’s an awful lot of requests! But I’ll do it.”

With that, my husband let his pen glide across the page, a look of deep concentration on his face. The lines seemed to flow so freely from his fingers that I had to wonder why he’d been so reluctant.

But I didn’t have to wonder for long.

“There. I’m done.”

“Hoo...ray?”

Violet ought to have been delighted to get her hands on the finished product, but her face fell almost instantly.

“What is it?”

“You’re badder than me.”

“I-I’m not *that* bad!”

What did you even draw, Mr. Fisalis?

“Let Mommy have a look, Lettie,” I said.

“Noooo!”

“Hm?”

Paying no attention to Mr. Fisalis’s desperate cries, I took a look at the drawing in my daughter’s hands.

What is this, abstract art?

“Hey, Cercis? What’s this jumble of lines supposed to be?”

“Flowers—what else? I based it on the ones in the vase over there.”

Oh, now that he mentions it...it looks absolutely NOTHING like those flowers!

He probably meant to capture its many layers of petals, but all I could see was a mess of scribbles. *Why didn’t he try drawing something simpler, like your cliché five-petaled flower? Boy, did I ever pick the wrong flower to decorate this room! Sorry, everyone!*

“And? Who’s that wearing the crown thingy?”

“Lettie.”

“Why did you put a tiara on her?”

“Because she’s my little princess.”

“I don’t look all scribbly.”

Mr. Fisalis had answered my question with no small amount of pride, but too bad for him—his “little princess” was pouting up a storm!

“I don’t think the princess is a fan of your work, Cercis.”

“Urgh...”

I could recognize the mansion, at least. It looked like *some* kind of building.

But man, I learned something new today... Mr. Fisalis is one catastrophically bad artist!

It was too much. The longer I stared at it, the funnier it got.

“Pfft... Wow, Cercis...*snrk*...drawing just isn’t your thing, huh?”

I knew I shouldn’t be laughing at something he’d worked so hard on. I tried my best to hold in the giggles, which only made my voice sound weird.

“There’s two things I’ve never been any good at: cooking and art.”

What does he do when he has to draw something for work? Wait, I know—that’s what he has all those talented subordinates for!

While I was considering how to pull my husband out of full-on sulk mode, Violet gave up on her father and declared, “If Daddy can’t, I’ll ask somebody else!”

She picked up her pen and paper again, this time walking up to the butler waiting behind us.

“Rohtas! Draw a picture.”

“Me? Are you sure?”

“Yeah! Draw me and some flowers and the manor!”

“...Why, it would be my pleasure.”

Huh. Did I detect a subtle pause from our articulate butler?

Just like Mr. Fisalis, he took the pen without hesitation and swept it over the page, the perfect picture of a skilled artist.

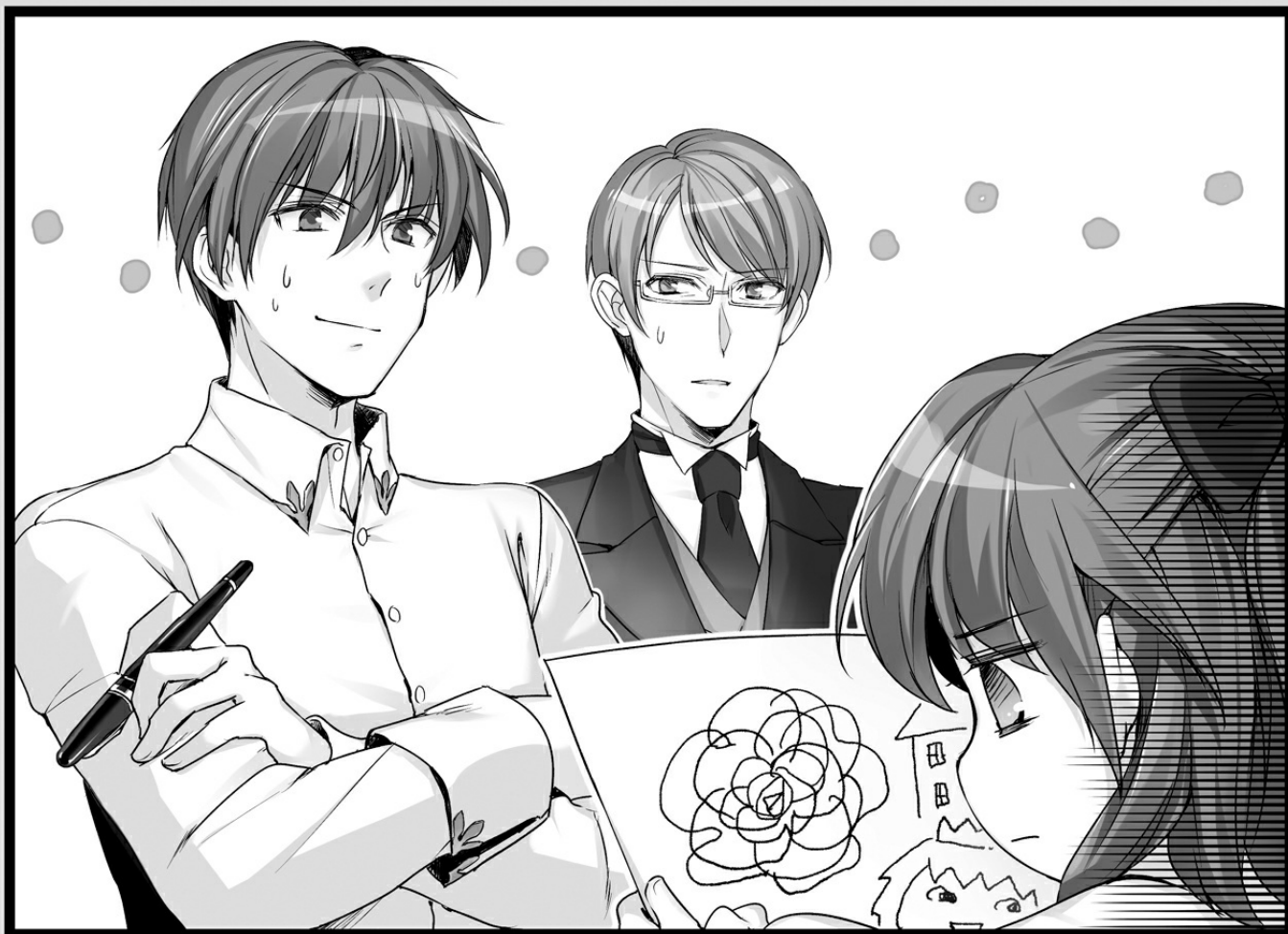
But as for the eventual product?

“...This isn’t much better than Cercis’s.”

“Hrk...” His temples twitched.

“Wow, Rohtas! I see I’m not the only awful artist around!”

Mr. Fisalis was ecstatic to have found someone who was in the same boat. Rohtas didn’t deign to respond.



“No good,” said Violet.

“Ah... I couldn’t meet Miss Lettie’s standards, it seems.”

Rohtas had produced a piece of art so bad that it could give Mr. Fisalis’s “abstract painting” a run for its money.

Mr. Fisalis and I couldn’t help but grin, while Violet puffed out her cheeks in a pout.

“Color me surprised! I didn’t think there was anything you *couldn’t* do, Rohtas.”

The butler cracked a strained smile. “Ha ha ha... I’ve never been much of an artist, I’m afraid.”

“Wow! Who would’ve guessed?!”

We left the teasing at that, however. Pushing too hard would’ve spelled trouble for us later.

Mr. Fisalis and I had gotten quite a kick out of that unexpected turn of events, but Violet didn’t seem too happy about it.

“I’m asking Bellis next! Daisy, take me to Bellis!”

“Okay!” her friend replied, leading the way out of the parlor.

Whoa, hold on! Bellis drawing pictures? Now this I gotta see.

“Count me in!”

“Huh? Vi?!”

“You can go ahead and start dinner without me, Cercis!”

“Hold it right there!”

“Madam, dinner is—”

“That can wait!”

Leaving a stunned Mr. Fisalis and Rohtas behind, I followed after the two girls.

*

“Bellis! Draw something!”

“Huh?”

When Violet and Daisy showed up at the greenhouse all of a sudden and thrust a piece of paper and pen his way, Bellis was uncharacteristically thrown for a loop.

“Draw...something?”

“Yeah! Draw me and Daisy and the manor and flowers!”

“Uh-huh...”

It sounded like she’d tacked on an extra request for Bellis! Daisy, too, was staring up at him with stars in her eyes.

“Okay... Hold on.”

Once he’d wiped the dirt from his hands, Bellis took the pen and began his sketch.

Mr. Fisalis had been a disaster of an artist—Rohtas, likewise. Now the question was: how was *Bellis’s* drawing going to end up? I awaited the finished product with as much excitement as the two children present.

“There. Done.”

“Show us! Show us!”

Oops. I think my voice was the loudest there.

Despite my clamoring, Bellis made a point of showing his picture to the girls first.

“Whoa! Cool!”

“That’s really pretty, daddy!”

His sketch had the girls jumping for joy, so I went ahead and took a peek myself. There on the sheet of paper, he’d drawn a whole row of super delicate flowers. I hadn’t seen *that* one coming.

“Wow, you’re good at this, Bellis.”

“I guess. Every now and then I have to draw a sketch of how I want a bouquet or a pruning job to look.”

So the same idea as Cartham, more or less.

“That explains why you’re only good at still lifes,” I said, to which Bellis responded with silence.

To expand on my comment: while the flowers and building were drawn in great and loving detail, the subjects of the picture—Violet and Daisy, that is—looked pretty slapdash.

“They move around a lot...so it’s hard to observe them.”

“Yeah, I get it. Those girls never stand still.”

For the ones who’d been asking people to draw them in the first place, they didn’t make for very good models.

Still! Thanks to them, I discovered a new side of Bellis today!

“I look ugly,” Violet complained.

“Me too,” said Daisy.

Bellis’s flowers looked great, but his people? Not so much. The little ones had yet to be fully appeased, it seemed.

“Let’s see Cartham next.”

Next thing I knew, they were running off to look for Cartham in the kitchen.

*

The mood in the kitchen was nothing like how we’d left it. The preparations for dinner were in full swing.

“Is the sauce for the vegetables ready yet? It better be chilled to perfection!”

“Yes! Here it is, sir!”

“We need more plates!”

“On it!”

Now that Mr. Fisalis was home, it was a race against the clock.

Violet, meanwhile, wasn’t much for reading the room. The picture of innocence, she walked right up to Cartham.

“Cartham! Draw me and Daisy and some flowers and dinner.”

“*Pardon?* Our little ladies, a bouquet of blossoms, and a feast? What a delightful combination!” He smiled down at the girls, switching from Scary Boss Mode to Doting Uncle Mode in the blink of an eye.

“Sorry, Cartham. I bet you’ve got your hands full getting dinner on the table, huh? You can worry about this later.”

“Fear not, *Madame*. This shouldn’t take any time at all,” he said with a grin. He then washed his hands and took the pen and paper from Violet.

Just like earlier, he ran his hand smoothly across the page. Judging by the little tune he was humming all the while, he must have had an even easier time with this sketch than the last one.

“All done!”

The artwork he’d churned out in almost no time at all looked shockingly good.

“Omigosh! These flowers look like flowers!”

“What else would they look like? You say the silliest things, *Madame*.”

“I look cute!” exclaimed Lettie.

“Me too!” said Daisy.

“But nowhere near as cute as the genuine article, of course,” said Cartham.

“The food looks yummy!”

“Ha ha ha! That’s tonight’s entrée, for the record.”

All the disasterpieces I’d seen that day had thrown off my eye for good art, but there was no mistaking the quality of Cartham’s work. It wasn’t super detailed or anything, but he’d managed to capture all the defining features of his subjects.

“Wowee! I knew you could draw food, but I didn’t know you were so good at drawing people too!”

“The key is to pin down the most important traits of whoever it is you’re drawing; once you’ve done that, it’s not hard to fool people’s eyes.”

“No way—you really are talented! I mean, compared to Cercis? Oh man... I’m gonna laugh just remembering it.”

“What did his look like?”

“In short? A *disasterpiece*.”

“Oh my... Well, we all have our strengths and weaknesses.”

“Whatever! What matters here is that you’re the unanimous winner of the Art Awards!”

“I had no idea there was a contest, but I’m honored nonetheless.”

Later on, Violet and Daisy begged Quince to draw for them. He turned out to be a decent enough artist of both people *and* animals.

Something tells me they should’ve just asked Quince to begin with.

6. Flür Eve

The cleaning blitz was done, the mistletoe boughs were hung, and the preparations for the big feast were complete.

“Now all that’s left is to wait for Flür National Day!”

“Have you forgotten about your predecessors’ arrival?”

“Oh, that’s right!”

Rohtas’s prompting reminded me: Mother and Father Fisalis were still on their way to Rohze. Silly me! That was the whole reason we’d bothered cleaning and decorating the cottage!

“Last we heard from them, they said they ought to be arriving around noon tomorrow.”

Tomorrow was the final day of the year. My in-laws were set to arrive at the absolute last minute before New Year’s.

“Should I assume they’ll be joining us for lunch, then?”

“That would be my guess.”

“Got it. Be sure to let Cartham know.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

With one last bow, Rohtas disappeared off to the kitchen.

“Once the in-laws are here, it’ll officially be time for New Year’s.”

“Indeed. It won’t be long before the cherry blossoms are in full bloom. That ought to make for a spectacular start to the new year,” said Stellaria, turning her head to look out over the garden. From here, we could see a big cherry tree in full bloom, its pale pink flowers coming to their peak.

This tree was unusual in that it sprouted petals rather than leaves, and it was when the cold season had come to an end—right around Flür National Day—that it would begin to flower. Since the timing of its bloom matched up almost

perfectly with the holiday, our kingdom had adopted it as our national tree.

“It should be about ninety percent of the way there. Though that already looks like full bloom to my eyes,” the maid commented. “If the nice weather keeps up, it ought to have reached its peak by Flür Day.”

“I can’t wait. I’m sure it’s going to look as pretty as ever.”

Both the people of Flür and nature itself were getting ready to ring in the new year.

*

Just as Rohtas had said, Mother and Father Fisalis ended up arriving just before noon the next day. They’d once again come bearing all sorts of souvenirs, including fruits and veggies from their home of Pied de la Montjuc, freshly mined gems, and even more toys and clothes for Violet.

“Look at that! She’s gotten even bigger and prettier since the last time we saw her!” said my father-in-law.

“Good to see you, grandpa.”

“And you’ve even learned how to greet us like a proper lady! I’m so proud.”

“Yeah! Gweetings to you too, grandma!”

“Very impressive, Lettie!”

My in-laws went ga-ga over the sight of Violet lifting the edges of her skirt and offering them a welcoming curtsy.

“We’ve brought you lots of tasty treats! Let’s eat them together later, shall we?”

“Hooray!”

Violet was ecstatic to hear the words “tasty treats.” All that decorum she’d shown mere seconds ago had gone right out the window; she really was still a kid, all right.

“All the mistletoe really puts you in the New Year’s mood.”

“We had a lot of nice boughs to choose from this year, so it looks even more stunning than usual.”

“I can see that. And as an added bonus, the cherry blossoms in Rohze are teetering near their peak! It’s warmer in Le Pied, so the petals have already fallen from the trees over there...but if you ask me, a flower is most beautiful in its prime!”

“I think so too.”

As pretty as it is to watch the petals fall, I’d rather look on the bright side of life and savor the moment of their bloom!

*

“I’m home.”

“Welcome ba—whoa!”

Right when I went to greet my husband at the door, the breeze picked up. I sure hadn’t been expecting to get smacked with such a powerful gust of wind.

“Vi! Are you okay?” Mr. Fisalis cried, reaching out to catch me in his arms.

“Just got knocked around a little. I’m fine.”

“It’s gotten pretty windy tonight, huh?”

“What happened? It was so calm out earlier!”

When we glanced up at the sky, lamenting the weather’s turn for the worse, we were greeted with the sight of the clouds careening across the sky. The trees planted all across the grounds were swaying in the wind, scattering their leaves everywhere.

“The forecast didn’t say it was supposed to rain tomorrow...”

“I hate when it gets this gusty,” I complained.

It sucks because my hair gets all messed up! Wait, uh, I mean...

“I always end up getting bits of dust in my eyes. It’s such a pain.”

“I can imagine. You have such big, beautiful eyes that it must be easy for dirt to get in there.”

“Was that supposed to be a compliment?”

Maybe I should invest in a pair of glasses as an anti-dust measure.

“I’ve got a feeling that winds *this* strong are going to do a number on our gorgeous cherry blossom tree. And right when it was at peak bloom too!”

“You’re probably right. I mean, the flowers *are* known to be short-lived.”

“Exactly!”

So ephemeral were those blossoms that a slight breeze was all it took to send them flying right at their peak. It was one delicate flower.

Aww... It’s such a waste that we can’t enjoy these pretty blossoms for longer. Maybe we oughta wipe the whole species out of existence so I never have to feel this way again! No, don’t be silly, Viola—their fragility is part of what makes them so wonderful!

Even at the dinner table, Father Fisalis seemed concerned about the roaring gale. “It’s getting awfully windy out there.”

It was so loud that we could hear it inside the mansion.

“Yeah. It was blowing pretty hard when I came home.”

“I see. It’ll be tough to have the annual rite in the middle of a storm.”

“I’ll bet. The ladies’ hair will get all messed up, and debris will be flying everywhere,” Mr. Fisalis agreed.

My father-in-law wagged a finger at his son. “Think bigger. A while back, there was a nobleman whose hairpiece was carried off in the wind.”

“Pfft!”

Jeez, Father Fisalis—don’t spring knee-slappers like that on us! Mr. Fisalis and I nearly spat out our drinks! A wig soaring through the air right in the middle of the Rite of Audience... Oh man, I’m gonna crack up just imagining it.

The whole dining room erupted into laughter. Only Violet wore a blank look on her face, the joke whooshing right over her head.

“Goodness, yes! I remember that!” Mother Fisalis said.

“It took all my willpower not to crack a smile!”

“Our seats were front and center, after all.”

She made a good point. If they'd started laughing where the whole audience could see them, it would've been so embarrassing for that poor nobleman!

"I made it through by biting down on my lip, and I caught His Highness pinching his thigh."

"I had to fake a sneeze to cover up my giggles. I don't *think* anyone noticed. Her Highness managed to hide her mouth behind her fan, but I remember her shoulders were shaking the whole time. And that's to say nothing of all the snickering from the people sitting towards the edges."

"I've never been more jealous of their seating arrangements than in that moment."

"You said it! My, I'm cracking up just thinking about it!"

Mother and Father Fisalis were laughing hard enough to make up for all the laughing they *couldn't* do back then.

And they were right; the corner seats were far enough out of the spotlight that you could even get away with dozing off there. If you wanted to laugh, all you had to do was cover your mouth with your sleeve, turn your face to the side, and you were golden.

By contrast, in seats as conspicuous as the Fisalis family's usual place—as in, right next to the king—you could expect all eyes to be on you. Nothing would go unnoticed. Boy, did I ever wish I could go back to those corner seats. Uh, not to get us off-track here!

Interesting. So that's the sort of thing that can happen on a windy day.

"Guess we'll have to head into this with an unshakable spirit," said Mr. Fisalis.

"You know what? I'll go ahead and sleep with my eyes open."

"What?! No fair, Vi!"

"Too bad! It's one of the skills I picked up during my bachelorette years."

As we watched my parents-in-law laugh themselves to tears, Mr. Fisalis and I took what we'd learned about tomorrow's Rite of Audience to heart.

7. The Greatest Gift of All

The night went on, but the strong winds—which were concerning in more ways than one—still hadn't let up. Father Fisalis said, "We'll have to go to the royal palace tomorrow come rain or shine, so let's call it a night," and we all went back to our respective rooms.

"Please, God, don't let any wigs go flying tomorrow!" I beseeched the heavens, gazing out the window.

Mr. Fisalis was quick to interject with a quip. "I don't think *that's* what you should be praying for, Vi."

Thanks for being the voice of reason, Mr. Fisalis! Now, to get back on track...

"I hope the wind doesn't blow all our cherry blossoms away. What a waste that'd be, when the tree was at its most beautiful."

"The late bloomers should be pretty firmly attached to the branches, but who knows. The gusts *are* getting awfully strong."

"I know, right?"

My husband has the right idea! The flowers should be a bigger concern than any hairpieces right now.

I could see the cherry blossom tree from our bedroom window; it was swaying in the wind, but it didn't look like it was losing too many petals. I sure hoped it would stay that way through the night.

*

I went to bed still anxious, but it wasn't long before my mounting dread of tomorrow's activities overtook my concern for the flowers.

"My plan is to smile and zone out for the length of the king's tedious—I mean, *wonderful* speech."

"Just don't get caught."

“I’m not that dumb!”

“Man... Maybe I should take a page out of your book and sleep with my eyes open.”

“Oh no you don’t! You have to stay awake and listen to his whole *riveting* speech.”

“Whaaat? How come?”

“Because I need you to give me a recap in case someone asks for my thoughts.”

“That’s so unfair!”

“I’m kidding! Let’s book it home as soon as the rite is over.”

“Yeah, good plan. We’ll have Lettie waiting at home and all. We’d better pass on the sanctuary visit again.”

“Yup!”

“When we get back, we can have a relaxed New Year’s celebration with our little girl.”

“Oh, that part sounds way more fun!”

Let’s forget all the boring stuff and focus on the good times!

*

“Vi!”

“...Hm?”

“Vi, wake up!”

“Is it morning already...?”

Mr. Fisalis woke me up in a whisper. If anything, he was the type to sit back and observe my slumbering face whenever I slept later than him, so if *he* was making an effort to rouse me... *Yikes! I must have really overslept!*

Convinced of the conclusion my sleep-fogged brain had come to, I snapped awake in an instant and sprung out of bed. “Eek! I’m late! I can’t believe I started off the new year by sleeping in!”

Yet Mr. Fisalis hushed me, a finger to his lips. “Shh! You didn’t. Calm down.”

“Huh? Seriously...? Gosh, you’re right.”

I lowered the volume of my voice at Mr. Fisalis’s urging, and when I glanced at the window, the sky beyond the curtains was pitch black. It was still well before dawn.

“Did something happen?”

“You could say that. Here, put this shawl on so you don’t get cold.”

“Sure.”

I took the shawl he handed me and draped it over my shoulders, then let him drag me by the hand towards the window.

Everyone else appeared to be fast asleep; we were the only ones making any noise in the whole pin-drop-silent mansion. At the very least, I was pretty sure this wasn’t some kind of intruder-related emergency.

Why else would he wake me up this early, though? I wondered with a curious tilt of my head, but it didn’t take long for him to answer my question.

“Look.”

He opened the curtains, and I was greeted with the sight of the cherry blossom petals fluttering and dancing in the wind.

“Whoa... It’s a petal shower!”

The sheer beauty of the scene had taken my breath away.

“The sound of the wind woke me up, and when I looked outside, I was blown away by what I saw. I couldn’t resist waking you up to share it with you.”

“No—thank you for doing that!”

In fact, if he *hadn’t* bothered to wake me up for this, I would’ve been pretty steamed!

The wind seemed to have died down since it roused Mr. Fisalis from his slumber, but it was still strong enough to send more and more petals flying through the air.

“We don’t see this sort of thing everyday. Want to go take a closer look?” I asked.

“It’s cold out there.”

“I’ll make sure to keep warm.”

I wanted to get an up-close view of the floral whirlwind, so my husband and I pulled warm coats over our nightgowns and headed out to the parlor.

“Not too loud now!” I whispered.

“Let’s not wake anyone up,” agreed Mr. Fisalis.

We tiptoed down the hallway, careful not to make a sound, and opened the door to the parlor just as silently.

Through the parlor window, we had an even better view of the cherry blossom tree than from our room. In the moonlight, the falling petals looked almost like snow.

“Do you think we can go outside?” I asked.

“As long as you’re careful not to catch a chill.”

“We can make it quick, then.”

I nudged open the door to the garden and walked over to the cherry blossom tree. As if the nights weren’t chilly enough already, the strength of the breeze made it even colder.

When he saw me shivering, Mr. Fisalis wrapped his arms around me from behind.

“You all right?”

“Yeah. I’m nice and warm now.”

As a matter of fact, I’m so embarrassed that my face is straight-up overheating!

Amid our silly banter, the blossoms continued to flutter through the air like snow.

“Most of the petals will have fallen by the time of the rite tomorrow.”

“No kidding! Our tree is gonna go bald before any of those noblemen do!”

“Vi... You’re killing the mood here.”

“Whoops. My bad.”

When I glanced back over my shoulder, I saw a rueful smile on my husband’s face.

“I’ve never seen anything so magical in my life,” I remarked.

“Me neither.”

“My condolences to the king, but I’m so glad I got to share this sight with you, Cercis.”

“Oh, Vi...”

“What a wonderful way to start a new year! Do you think this is God’s gift to us? I’ve got a good feeling about the days ahead!”

“You know what, Vi? I consider *you* to be my gift from God! You and Lettie both.”

“There you go getting all romantic on me! In the spirit of the holidays, I’ll let that one slide.”

“Ha ha—why, thank you. I appreciate it.”

“You’re very welcome.”

We gazed out at the cherry blossoms in the tranquil moonlight. In that moment, I could have sworn the world belonged to just the two of us.

*



I would have liked to stay there watching the petals forever, but alas, the body has a mind of its own. No sooner had I begun to shiver than I unleashed a powerful sneeze.

Mr. Fisalis was keyed into even the slightest of changes in my physical condition. Just as I thought, *Great, now I've done it*, he said, "Okay. I hate to cut this short, but we're going back inside."

"Fine, fine!"

He swung me around 180 degrees, his arms still wrapped around me from behind, and pushed me right back into the mansion.

"It was cold out there, but it was so pretty," I said.

"Yeah. I wish we could have stayed longer."

"You're telling me!"

"But I'm putting my foot down. Just look at you—chilled to the bone!"

"I know."

Though I'd had Mr. Fisalis to keep me warm, we'd been out in the garden in the middle of the night with the wind blowing something fierce. Of course I was going to get cold.

"It's still too early to be up and at 'em, so let's warm up under the covers."

"Good idea!"

Then again, I was so thoroughly frozen that I wasn't sure a few blankets would be enough to thaw me.

Man...in times like this, nothing beats soaking in a tub of warm water! But I couldn't live with myself if I asked the servants to draw me a bath at this hour. Let's not.

I was trailing after Mr. Fisalis, my head full of such thoughts, when he came to a dead stop all of a sudden.

"What's wrong?" I asked him in a whisper only he could hear.

"Happy New Year," he said.

And next thing I knew, he'd placed a kiss on my lips.

"Huh?"

"Look up."

"Oh—the mistletoe!"

"You got it."

I'd been flustered by how sudden the kiss was—until Mr. Fisalis smiled and pointed to a sprig of mistletoe decorating the wall.

Tradition said that a kiss under the mistletoe on New Year's would bring one happiness.

"Isn't that jumping the gun?"

"Of course not. The date's already turned over," he replied, the picture of nonchalance.

Jeez! He's really dialing up the charm today!

When we snuck back into our room as quietly as we'd left, I spotted something giving off steam from atop the bedside table. I got closer, wondering what it could be, and found that it was a cup of some kind of hot beverage.

"Was someone else awake?" Mr. Fisalis wondered.

"That's the only possible answer."

Whatever the case, I was glad to have something warm to put in my chilled body. I picked up the cup and discovered that it was mulled wine. The sweet fragrance of the spices wafted up with the steam.

A single sip sent a wave of warmth washing over my body. The crisp, sweet aftertaste had hints of molasses in it.

"This'll put us right back to sleep," said Mr. Fisalis.

"I'm all warmed up now," I said.

With both our bodies and our hearts warmed, we indulged ourselves in a few more hours of sleep.

The next day rolled around.

“That was quite the gorgeous petal storm last night. However, I can’t say I approve of sneaking out in the wee hours.”

“We know! Thanks for the mulled wine!” Mr. Fisalis and I chorused. We were no match for Rohtas’s smile.

8. Playing with a Handicap?

Despite sneaking out in the middle of the night to watch the cherry blossoms, we avoided catching a cold in time for the new year—and we had Rohtas’s mulled wine to thank for that, probably.

The cherry blossom tree had managed to hold out in spite of all the petals it had shed the previous night; there were still plenty of flowers left on its branches.

“I’m glad to see it wasn’t stripped bare yesterday,” said Stellaria.

“Yeah. Though I got my fill of the cherry blossoms last night, so I wouldn’t have minded too much either way.”

“Huh?”

“Oh, nothing!”

While Stellaria was looking out the window at the tree, I almost fessed up to my and Mr. Fisalis’s midnight escapades, but that was supposed to be our little secret! I had to act like nothing had happened. (Even though Rohtas already knew the truth!) *

“Happy Flür Day!”

“Same to you.”

“Here’s hoping the year ahead is a good one.”

“Happy Flür Day, evewyone!”

We were seated at the table for our New Year’s breakfast. Having my in-laws, my husband, Violet, and I gather around and say our New Year’s greetings before we dug into our meal filled me with the energy to face the day.

Once we were done wishing each other a happy holiday, the servants brought out a lavish meal—our New Year’s feast.

Though we’d left our days of breakfast buffets behind, the table was lined

with all sorts of sumptuous dishes just for this occasion. No problem—even the jolly green giant had to take a vacation for New Year’s!

“Too bad we’ve got that headache of a ceremony after this,” Father Fisalis complained.

“I know it’s an annual tradition, but that never makes it any less of a pain. I’d rather stay here and play with Lettie. You know what? I seem to have come down with a cold, so perhaps I’ll go ahead and skip the rite altogether!” said my mother-in-law, who was currently the perfect picture of health. Now *that* was a bald-faced lie if I ever saw one.

“That’s no fair!” her husband shot back. “I’ve got a cold too! I’m staying here with you!”

“Don’t be silly, dear! You can’t do that.”

“I want to be with Lettie as much as you do! I bet you’re scheming to keep her all to yourself!”

“Of course I am!”

Mother and Father Fisalis were getting swept up in their banter. It was way too early in the new year to be dealing with this, so I prayed that they would cease and desist.

Mr. Fisalis stepped in to intervene. “Uh-huh. How about you two leave it at that? Just tune out the ceremony if you hate it so much. Besides, no one will stop us from heading home if we tell them Lettie’s waiting for us.”

I’m glad he said something! That wasn’t the daughter-in-law’s place to butt in.

The pair took their son’s suggestion to heart.

Violet had yet to make her royal palace debut, so she would be skipping the New Year’s ceremony to stay home again.

“Good point. Let’s do without the sanctuary visit this time.”

“Agreed. We have to get home as soon as possible.”

“We won’t be making our usual trip to the church downtown either.”

“Not this year, we won’t! We’ve got to be good!”

For the sake of the little girl waiting at home, we had to zoom straight back to the manor!

“I mean, from *our* perspectives, the Rite of Audience is nothing compared to Lettie’s birthday next week,” said Mr. Fisalis.

“Exactly!” his parents agreed in unison, nodding vigorously.

That’s right! As far as we’re concerned, Violet’s birthday is a way bigger occasion than the new year!

*

True to my word, I let the New Year’s ceremony go in one ear and out the other. I even managed to catch a few z’s with my eyes open—and no one even noticed!

When the rite was over, the king asked Father Fisalis to join him on a sanctuary visit, but my father-in-law shot the invitation down with the explanation that Violet was waiting at home. In any other situation, that borderline *lèse-majesté* would have me fearing for his life, but our king was one heck of a personable ruler. All he said was, “That poor girl! You’d better get going!” What a nice guy.

We packed into our carriage and hit the road without a moment’s hesitation.

“I’ll give you a handicap of five steps. How’s that sound?”

“Five?”

On the ride home, Mr. Fisalis and I were having a discussion of the utmost gravity.

“Isn’t that too few? Be a little more generous! I need at least ten!”

“Not a chance! I know full well what you’re capable of! Five steps should be more than enough!”

“You train on a regular basis, so you’ve got to be way faster than me!”

“Then...seven steps?”

“How did that number get so much smaller?!”

What had us so worked up, you might be wondering? Why, none other than

the Annual Race for Lettie's First New Year's Kiss!

Last time around, Quince had stolen her *first* first kiss (by her own choice, but details).

That meant the pressure was on this year. We had to make up for that travesty.

Neither I nor Mr. Fisalis was willing to cede the right to her *next* first kiss, so we'd determined that the fairest way to settle this was on a first-come-first-served basis. The race would start the moment we alighted from our carriage. The first one to make it to Violet, who would be waiting for us at the front door, would be the winner.

That said, if I started from the same spot as Mr. Fisalis, I'd have been at an obvious disadvantage; hence why I was negotiating for a handicap.

"Man, I can't believe seven steps is all you're willing to give me... But hey, you never said they couldn't be *big* steps!"

"That's cheating, Vi!"

Mother and Father Fisalis burst out laughing when they saw how seriously we were taking this.

"Oh, give her ten, Cercis!"

"Mother, no! You're only saying that because you don't know what Vi is capable of! Don't let her looks deceive you—she's lightning fast!"

"My, is she really?"

"I am *not*! Wait a second—how do you think I 'look,' exactly?"

"Dainty? Slender?"

"Absolutely not." All eyes were on me, so I denied it as hard as I could. Another beat later, I conceded, "Fine. I'll take the seven steps."

"Seven steps it is."

I think I can manage that...maybe? But it's definitely gonna be close.

I was going to have to give this race everything I had!

At last, we arrived at the manor, got down from the carriage, and it was go time! Our referee was Father Fisalis, who was waiting at the entrance ahead of us. His shout of “On your mark, get set, go!” was our cue to take off running.

The result: Mr. Fisalis won.

“This sucks! This absolutely sucks!”

“So much for being the bigger person—I ran as fast as I could go! Ha ha ha!”

Mr. Fisalis gleefully gave Violet her kiss, while I chewed on my handkerchief and told myself, “Next year will be mine!”

My in-laws and the servants watched us, laughing.

It was looking to be yet another peaceful year at the Fisalis manor.

9. A Surprise Invitation

We'd taken the mistletoe down, and the New Year's mood was starting to fade. The rest of the world was getting back to life as usual, but the fun had just begun at the Fisalis manor.

You guessed it—Violet's second birthday was coming up!

It was supposed to be a family-only celebration, but between all the servants and in-laws suggesting "let's do this" or "no, not that—this!", having everyone brainstorm what sort of party to throw had generated even more hype around the event than Flür Day.

Over in the kitchen, Cartham and his cooks were discussing what sort of dishes to serve or what kind of cute cake to make. For the record, Tinctorius had yet to return to the royal palace.

Meanwhile in the garden, Bellis and his gardeners were making plans for the big day. Last year, for example, they had trimmed the bushes visible through the dining room window into fun animal shapes!

Inside the manor, the maids were considering how to decorate.

Violet sure was lucky to have so many people thinking of her!

Amid all the excitement, we had a sudden visitor show up at the manor.

"Miss Verbena! It's been too long."

"I was in the area, so I thought I'd stop by. Is now a good time?"

"Yes, of course!"

Miss Verbena of the Argenteia family had said some mean things to me when we'd first met (though strangely enough, it hadn't felt all that much like she was putting me down), but that was a thing of the past; she was now one of my few good friends in high society.

I was surprised to see her drop by without any notice, but those were my shut-in...*ahem*, "busy mother" sensibilities in action. *Now, whatever can I do for*

her?

I was more than happy to usher Miss Verbena to the parlor.

*

"I wanted to talk to you about next week. How would you like to bring Lettie over to our place?"

"To the Argenteia manor?"

"Yes. I'm thinking of hosting a tea party for some of my friends. During the daytime, of course! Lettie's about ten years too young to be attending any soirées!"

"Right..."

"I've invited Miss Iris and a few more of your friends to join us!"

"That's nice..."

"Vi?"

I appreciated the invitation, but I hesitated to give her an answer.

Why, you might ask? Because that day was Violet's birthday!

"Uh... Actually, that day is—"

I attempted to mumble my way through a response, only for Miss Verbena to cut me off. "Yes, I know. It's Lettie's birthday. You don't have to RSVP right now. Be sure to discuss it with the duke first."

Wow! Miss Verbena remembered Violet's birthday!

I mean, she *had* given her a gift last year, so I should've expected she would.

Everyone from my in-laws to the servants was looking forward to Violet's birthday. No way we could have the star of the day skip out.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be! Like I said, talk it over with the duke and come to a decision."

"Thanks."

As much as I wanted to go, my best move was to get Mr. Fisalis's opinion first.

*

“She said it was scheduled for the afternoon, didn’t she? We won’t be starting the celebration here until evening, so why not attend?”

The second after Mr. Fisalis got home from work and I told him about Miss Verbena’s invitation, he gave me permission to go.

He was more than familiar with the venue of the Argenteia manor. Plus, the attendees would be a bunch of my lady friends, so he had no reason to object.

Good point! She did say that!

“Do you mind if I go ahead and tell her yes, then?”

“Of course not. You should go have fun with your friends every now and then.”

“Thank you so much! I’ll send her my RSVP tomorrow!”

He’s being so understanding today! I thought for a second there.

“Oh, but if you’re too late getting home, I’ll have to come pick you up.”

“...Sure.”

Never mind. He never changes.

*

Then came Violet’s birthday.

“Have fun!”

“We’ll be back by evening!”

“Bye-bye!”

The servants watched as Violet and I left for the Argenteia manor.

“Can you be a good girl for me, Lettie?”

“Yeah!”

“I want you to be on your best behavior today.”

“Yeah!”

I can’t tell if she gets what I’m saying or not. Like, technically it was an

affirmative reply... Oh well. All the guests are going to people she already knows, so it should work out.

When we arrived at the Argenteia manor, the river was looking as gorgeous as ever. Wait, I should probably do a better job of setting the scene, huh?

A big stream known as the Wahl River ran through the Argenteia estate, and it was a stunning site to behold. That's what I meant.

Casting glances at the swiftly flowing river and magnificent gardens, we made our way to yet another lovely Argenteia mansion.

"Welcome!"

"Thanks for inviting us!"

"I'm so glad the duke gave you permission to come. Of course, if he hadn't, I simply would've kidnapped you both!"

"What?"

"Oh, nothing!"

"Uh-huh. He did say he'd come pick me up if I was running late, though."

"He never changes! Well, come along now! Everyone's waiting."

"Are they? I'm sorry."

As usual(?), Miss Verbena had taken on the task of personally escorting us to the garden. There, we found that everything was already arranged for the tea party.

"Hi, Vi!"

"Greetings, Vi! Same to you, Lettie."

The soirée quartet was engaged in friendly conversation. I'd assumed the guests would all be my high society friends, but it seemed I'd been mistaken. That is to say...

"Hey, Madam Fisalis! Long time no see!"

"Happy birthday, Lettie!"

"We went ahead and took the day off for this!"

If it isn't the Bombshell Trio! What happened to wo—wait, they just said they took time off.

At least I'd been right about everyone there being a friend of mine! Mr. Fisalis wasn't going to be too happy about it, though.

That explains the "kidnapping" Miss Verbena mentioned. She would've had these girls do her dirty work, I bet.

"What's going on, Miss Verbena?" I asked, looking back at her in surprise.

"Hee hee! I got everyone together to celebrate Lettie's birthday! Now—bring out the you-know-what!" she commanded one of her servants with a smug grin.

"Yes, ma'am."

What now? I wondered, only for her servants to come back pushing a wagon along. There was something tall riding in it, but I couldn't tell what it was because it was covered in cloth.

"Come, Lettie! Why don't you pull off the sheet for us?" Miss Verbena urged her, putting one of the corners of the long piece of cloth into her hand.

"I tug?"

"Yes, dear."

"Yay! That sounds fun!"

Her eyes lit up, and she gave the sheet in her hand a firm yank. And then...

The cloth fluttered through the air, revealing a gorgeous cake underneath.

Of course, it was entirely thanks to the servants' assistance that the sheet had fallen away so cleanly.

"Wow! It's a big cake!"

"That right there is your birthday cake, Lettie. Eat up!" said Miss Verbena, getting down on her knees so she was eye level with Violet.

"Thanks, Miss Verbena!" the little girl exclaimed, then looked up at the tall cake with stars in her eyes.

Now that the guest of honor had arrived, the tea party (a.k.a. birthday party)

began. Between all the presents, birthday wishes, and bites of delicious cake, Violet had the time of her life.

Once she'd gotten tired of eating, she had a ball running around and playing tag with the ladies.

*

"The cake was THIS big!"

"Then I'll whip you up an even *bigger* cake for next year!"

"Yay!"

Violet had been so tuckered out from all the fun that she'd slept like a log on the carriage ride home. The second we made it home to the mansion, she'd gone around telling all the servants how much she'd enjoyed it.

While everyone else smiled as Violet stretched herself as far as she could in her attempts to express the size of the cake, Tinctorius alone took it as a challenge.

Do you really need to make a cake bigger than Violet herself?

At the family celebration, we had all of Violet's favorite treats. It was a feat made possible by Cartham's exhaustive knowledge of her tastes!

"I love Cartham's food! This cake is so yummy!"

"I know, right?"

You did it! You got her by the stomach!

He'd managed to totally overshadow the afternoon cake.

Violet was overjoyed to get gifts from us, the servants, Grandma, and Grandpa. The servants gave her one flower each, and when you put them all together, they made a beautiful bouquet. I was willing to bet Bellis had done the math on that one!

With so many people excited to celebrate her big day, she was sure to make it through another year healthy and happy.

10. Happiness Around the Corner

Now that Violet's birthday had come and gone, the festivities were over and we were forced to return to our regular routine.

Mother and Father Fisalis went home to Le Pied. Quince went back to his boarding school, and Tinctorius returned to the royal palace. It felt a little lonely to watch as our ranks thinned out.

The servants who had gone home for the holidays came back to the manor and took over the shifts of those taking a belated New Year's break.

Then, one day...

I found Violet languishing on the parlor sofa after breakfast, which was strange. That little bundle of energy was always asking what we were going to play the second she'd seen Daddy off at the door.

That sofa must be awfully comfy! Okay, something tells me that's not the reason.

She didn't move an inch from where she lay flopped over the couch. I figured she was probably sleepy, but it was too early for her afternoon nap.

"Lettie?"

"Yeah..."

Her answer indicated that she was awake, but she sounded lifeless.

"Lettie's acting strange today, huh?"

"Yes—I think so too."

Even Mimosa and Daisy were looking at Violet with concern.

"Lettie? Are you sleepy? Don't you want to play?"

"Mm... My head's heavy. Can't get up."

"What?!"

Her head feels so heavy that she can't get up?

I placed a hand to Violet's forehead in surprise...and it was burning up!

"Mimosa! Lettie has a fever!" I announced, looking over my shoulder at the maid.

"Oh no! Let's get her to her room right away!"

The parlor erupted into a flurry of activity.

"I'll have Rohtas call the doctor!"

"I'll get some ice from the kitchen!"

"We need a towel and washbasin!"

It was reassuring to see how quickly the maids swung into action.

"I'll bring Lettie up to her room," I said. "I'm counting on you guys to handle the rest."

"Yes, ma'am!" everyone shouted back.

I left things in the hands of my capable servants and hurried to the nursery, cradling Violet in my arms.

*

"The fatigue must have caught up to her—it's been one fun activity after another, after all. Once she ran out of steam, she must've caught a cold."

The doctor had rushed over straight away, and that was his diagnosis after performing a full check-up.

The cold medicine he'd given her first thing must have done its job, seeing as she'd drifted off into peaceful sleep.

She got sick from exhaustion, huh?

That made sense. It'd been a non-stop marathon from the New Year's holidays to her birthday. She'd been in a state of excitement the whole time, too, so of course she'd feel worn out once the dust had settled.

"So it's not a serious illness or anything, right?"

"Not at all. If she gets some rest and takes her medicine, she should be better

in a matter of days. I'll leave you a second cure to try in the event her fever doesn't go down."

"Thank you."

"The bug that's been making the rounds lately tends to linger; her temperature might fluctuate through the course of the day, so be sure to keep a careful eye on her."

"Got it!"

The doctor left us with the cold medicine and backup fever reducer and took his leave.

"She seemed so listless that I was worried she'd come down with something serious. I'm glad it turned out to be a plain old cold."

I changed the towel on Violet's forehead. Her fever had gone down, but her face was still pretty red.

She wrinkled her brow for a fleeting moment when I pressed the fresh, cold washcloth to her skin, but she didn't wake from her slumber.

"You said it! Though I won't stop worrying until she actually gets better," said Mimosa, the look on her face a complicated mix of relief and concern.

"That's fair. The doctor said it'll be a few days before she's recovered, so I'll tend to her in the meantime."

"What? But—"

"Who else is going to do it? We're short on staff, so I know you're all extra busy."

Though we hadn't *quite* lost half our servants to the New Year's shift, we still had fewer people around than usual.

Lettie might have come down with nothing more than a mild cold, but that didn't mean I wasn't worried. I wanted to personally nurse her back to health. Besides, I was the one with the most time on her hands around here!

"Very well. We'll provide support however we can, of course."

I could rest easy knowing I had Mimosa and the rest of Violet's maids to help

me out.

The one most devastated over the news of Lettie's sickness was Mr. Fisalis.

"Are you *sure* it's just a cold? Is she running a fever? Oh, my poor baby!"

The second he got home, he made a beeline for the nursery, took Violet's hands in his, and grieved like the world was coming to an end. And I'd literally *just* told him it was only a cold!

My husband looked like he was going to burst out crying any moment now. I put a hand to his slouched back.

"I'll look after Lettie until she gets better," I told him.

"*You* will? Couldn't you leave that to Mimosa and the rest of the maids?"

"I *could*, but I'd be worried the whole time. Better to handle it myself."

"I suppose so. I only wish I could do the same."

"Not happening. You have to go to work."

"I knew you'd say that! Fine—just promise me you won't overdo it."

"Sure thing!"

Now that I had Mr. Fisalis's permission, I'd put my all into nursing Violet back to health!

*

Three days later, she hadn't *quite* recovered. She still had a slight temperature, just as the doctor had warned me.

Sometimes her fever would get worse in the middle of the night, so the constant interruptions to my slumber had left *me* a tad sleep-deprived too.

As much as I wanted to dive face-first into my own soft bed, seeing Violet so woozy that she'd spent the whole day lying down made me feel bad for her (though maybe not *quite* as much as Mr. Fisalis), and I stopped feeling like my own problems mattered so much.

"Let's go take a walk through the garden when you're all better."

"Mm..."

“Daisy’s waiting for your big comeback.”

“Kay...”

She ate a spoonful of Cartham’s custom-made potage loaded with nutritious vegetables. The color was starting to come back to her face by now, so it was surely only a matter of time before she recovered.

But the moment I stopped to breathe a sigh of relief, the world started spinning around me.

“Huh...?”

Wait, it can’t be the room that’s spinning. I must be having a dizzy spell.

“What’s wrong, Madam?” Mimosa asked, noticing that I’d stopped feeding Violet.

“Nothing. I got a little dizzy, that’s all. Could you take over for a second?”

“Are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just sleepy, if I had to guess.”

“Oh dear...”

I handed the spoon and the bowl of potage to Mimosa, then sat down on one of the chairs in the room.

Great! Now my lack of sleep is catching up to me!

I thought the symptoms would go away if I took some time to relax, but my dizziness only grew worse, and I was starting to get nauseous too. And then came the chills... Had I hit the limit of how long I could go without some shut-eye?!

Though I figured I was better off getting some rest, I was still worried about my daughter. I got so wrapped up in my internal conflict that I didn’t even notice that Violet had finished eating.

“Madam? You don’t look so well,” Mimosa said, gazing at me with concern.

“I think I’ve hit the limit of how long I can stay awake. I’m dizzy, I’m nauseous, and I’ve got the chills.”

“Oh no! That’s terrible! Let’s get you to your room right away!”

“But Lettie...”

“You can’t look after Miss Lettie in *your* condition. You can count on the rest of us to take good care of her, so please go get some sleep!”

Mimosa never gets this bossy. Do I really look that bad? Well, I guess Violet’s already on the mend, so I might as well take her up on her offer.

“Fine. I’ll go to bed.”

“Please do. I’ll call for Stellaria.”

At first I thought she was overreacting, but I was getting woozier by the second, so bringing Stellaria in had been the right call.

“You’ve stayed by her side for days now; it must have taken its toll on you.”

“Man, I really shouldn’t be pushing the limits of sleep deprivation. I’m too old for this.”

“Excuse me?”

“Uh, nothing!”

Please don’t glare at me with a smile on your face, Miss Stellaria!

“Shall I call for the doctor?”

“No—it’s fine. All I need is a few hours of sleep.”

“Are you certain?”

“Yep.”

Just let me catch some z’s already. I’m sure I’ll wake up good as new.

And so, I left Violet in the care of our maids and got some rest.

*

A few days passed.

Violet had made a full recovery, and she and Daisy were playing together with all their usual energy.

But as for me?

"I didn't realize that a mere lack of sleep could do this much damage to the body."

"Come on! It's clearly more than that!" came Mr. Fisalis's incredulous retort.

Yeah, you guessed it—I was still feeling under the weather.

I'd refused a visit from the doctor under the assumption that it was a simple case of exhaustion, but I wasn't getting any better no matter how long I rested.

"Did I catch Lettie's cold?"

"I could see that. You were with her twenty-four seven, after all."

"Lettie's all better, and I'm only getting worse... Does age make all the difference?!"

"You're not that old!" he shot back, exasperated again.

Later, the servants called for the doctor (ignoring my opinion on the matter), and this was his diagnosis: "Congratulations. It would seem your second child is on the way."

"What? It's not sleep deprivation?"

"Not at all. This is morning sickness."

"No way!"

I can't believe this! My second pregnancy!

The doctor had a laugh at my expense, wondering why I hadn't recognized the symptoms my second time around...but hello? I hadn't figured it out *because* it felt totally different from last time!

But moving right along...

The maids were overjoyed to hear the big news.

"He said I'm pregnant!"

"Congratulations!"

"We have to tell Mr. Fisalis...*after* he gets off work!"

"Yes. No doubt he'd abandon his duties and come running straight home."

“And we can’t have that.”

“We should report this to Rohtas first.”

“Hee hee!” we all giggled.

Honestly, it’s kind of hilarious that Rohtas gets to hear the news before my husband.

*

When Mr. Fisalis got home from work, he was initially too overwhelmed by the double whammy news of Violet’s recovery and my pregnancy to react.

“What? Lettie’s better, *and* you’re pregnant? Huh? *HUH?!’*”

Of course, once he’d registered what was happening, he was absolutely ecstatic.

“So *that’s* why you were feeling so sick?”

“Sounds like it.”

“I’m glad we don’t have anything to regret this time around.”

“You said it.”

When I’d found out I was pregnant with Violet, we’d just come galloping home from the far reaches of Rohze. At the time, Mr. Fisalis had been super worried that all that bumping up and down on a horse had been bad for me and the baby.

“He said the baby’s due later this year.”

“That’s good to know.”

We’d seen the year off to a wonderful start under a blooming cherry blossom tree, and now this.

This really *was* shaping up to be an amazing year!





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Can Someone Please Explain What's Going On?! Volume 9

by Tsuredurebana

Translated by Tara Quinn Edited by Sarah Tilson

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